



CLASSROOM OF
THE ELITE

ALTER
SOLACE



Classroom of the Elite: Alter - Solace

Izaya Hasegawa

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Special Chapter: Characters

Class A

Class Representative:

- *Horikita, Suzune*

Female:

- *Azuma, Sana*

- *Ishikura, Kayoko*

- *Ichihashi, Ruri*

- *Inogashira, Kokoro*

- *Onodera, Kayano*

- *Karuizawa, Kei*

- *Kushida, Kikyou*

- *Sakura, Airi*

- *Satou, Maya*

- *Shinohara, Satsuki*

- *Sonoda, Chiyo*

- *Nishimura, Ryuuko*

- *Hasebe, Haruka*

- *Horikita, Suzune*

- *Maezono, Masami*

- *Matsushita, Chiaki*

- *Mori, Nene*

- *Yokoyama, Misaki*

- *Rino, Akari*

- *Wang, Mei-yu*

Notes:

- "*Yokoyama Misaki*" is the temporary name that I've assigned for the last unnamed female student in Kiyotaka's class.

- *Maezono* and *Rino's* first names; "*Masami*" and "*Akari*", respectively, are also temporary names that I've assigned because they don't have one in the canon just yet.

Male:

- *Ayanokouji, Kiyotaka*

- *Ike, Kanji*

- *Ijuuin, Wataru*

- *Okitani, Kyousuke*

- *Onizuka, Kiyoshi*

- *Ueno, Itsuki*

- Kikuchi, Eita
- Kouenji, Rokusuke
- Sugawara, Kazuto
- Sudou, Ken
- Sotomura, Hideo
- Hirata, Yousuke
- Hondou, Ryoutaro
- Makida, Susumu
- Minami, Setsuya
- Minami, Hakuo
- Miyake, Akito
- Miyamoto, Soshi
- Yamauchi, Haruki
- Yukimura, Teruhiko

Notes:

- *"Ueno Itsuki" and "Sugawara Kazuto" are the temporary names that I've assigned for the two unnamed male students in Kiyotaka's class.*
- *Onizuka's first name; "Kiyoshi", is also a temporary name that I've assigned because he doesn't have one in the canon just yet.*

Notes:

- *I've assigned temporary names to all the unnamed first-year students.*
- *I've marked their names with a "Temp." so you guys can know.*
- *Alphabetical order is observed in conjunction with the Zodiac Test.*

Class B

Class Representative:

- Sakayanagi, Arisu

Female:

- Kamuro, Masumi
- Kokubo, Saki (Temp.)
- Sakayanagi, Arisu
- Serizawa, Karen (Temp.)
- Tanihara, Mao
- Tamiya, Emi
- Tsukaji, Shihori
- Todoroki, Fumiko (Temp.)
- Nakajima, Riko
- Nishi, Haruka
- Nishikawa, Ryouko
- Fukuyama, Shinobu
- Busujima, Rin (Temp.)

- *Motodoi, Chikako*
- *Morishita, Ai*
- *Murase, Ayaka (Temp.)*
- *Yano, Koharu*
- *Yamamura, Miki*
- *Rokkaku, Momoe*
- *Wakabayashi, Youko (Temp.)*

Male:

- *Ishida, Yuusuke*
- *Inoue, Jun*
- *Kitou, Hayato*
- *Katsuragi, Kouhei*
- *Satonaka, Satoru*
- *Sanada, Kousei*
- *Sawada, Yasumi*
- *Shimazaki, Ikkei*
- *Shimizu, Naoki*
- *Sugio, Hiroshi*
- *Takemoto, Shigeru*
- *Tsukasaki, Taiga*
- *Totsuka, Yahiko*
- *Toba, Shigeru*
- *Hashimoto, Masayoshi*
- *Machida, Kouji*
- *Matoba, Shinji*
- *Morishige, Takurou*
- *Morimiya, Takashi*
- *Yoshida, Kenta*

Class C

Class Representative:

- *Ichinose, Honami*

Female:

- *Ashikagi, Himari (Temp.)*
- *Amikura, Mako*
- *Andou, Sayo*
- *Ichinose, Honami*
- *Kageyama, Misa (Temp.)*
- *Kobashi, Yume*
- *Shiranami, Chihito*
- *Takahashi, Kanata (Temp.)*
- *Tsube, Hitomi*
- *Ninomiya, Yui*
- *Niwa, Chiasa (Temp.)*

- *Himeno, Yuki*
- *Horie, Keiko (Temp.)*
- *Futaba, Subaru (Temp.)*
- *Minamikata, Kozue*
- *Miyajima, Reiko (Temp.)*
- *Miwa, Himeko (Temp.)*
- *Mukai, Nao (Temp.)*
- *Yaegashi, Hina (Temp.)*
- *Rokuda, Shuu (Temp.)*

Male:

- *Abe, Shinichiro (Temp.)*
- *Uchida, Yuuto (Temp.)*
- *Kanzaki, Ryuuji*
- *Shibata, Sou*
- *Sumida, Makoto*
- *Tanaka, Haruhito (Temp.)*
- *Tokashiki, Kazuma (Temp.)*
- *Tokitou, Katsumi*
- *Nakanishi, Kaito*
- *Nakamura, Touma (Temp.)*
- *Hamaguchi, Tetsuya*
- *Bandou, Mikado (Temp.)*
- *Beppu, Ryouta*
- *Maeda, Ren (Temp.)*
- *Moriyasu, Asahi (Temp.)*
- *Moriyama, Hiroshi*
- *Yonezu, Haruto*
- *Renbutsu, Kouta (Temp.)*
- *Watanabe, Norihito*
- *Watari, Shun (Temp.)*

Class D

Class Representative:

- *Ryuuen, Kakeru*

Female:

- *Aizawa, Natsuki (Temp.)*
- *Isoyama, Nagisa*
- *Ibuki, Mio*
- *Okabe, Shouko*
- *Kinoshita, Minori*
- *Shiina, Hiyori*
- *Zayasu, Hanabi (Temp.)*
- *Nishino, Takeko*
- *Hanagaki, Midori (Temp.)*

- *Bachira, Momo (Temp.)*
- *Manabe, Shiho*
- *Mineshima, Eru (Temp.)*
- *Morofuji, Rika*
- *Yamashita, Saki*
- *Yamaga, Yuki (Temp.)*
- *Yajima, Mariko*
- *Yabu, Nanami*
- *Rinzaki, Michiko*
- *Watase, Megumi (Temp.)*
- *Wada, Kanako (Temp.)*

Male:

- *Aragaki, Ryou (Temp.)*
- *Ishizaki, Daichi*
- *Oda, Takumi*
- *Kaneda, Satoru*
- *Kajino, Masato*
- *Komiya, Kyougo*
- *Kondou, Reo*
- *Suzuki, Hidetoshi*
- *Sonoda, Masashi*
- *Tokitou, Hiroya*
- *Demura, Atsushi (Temp.)*
- *Nakaizumi, Izumi*
- *Nagaoka, Ichiro (Temp.)*
- *Nomura, Yuuji*
- *Miyabe, Kenjiro (Temp.)*
- *Yamada, Albert*
- *Yamawaki, Souta*
- *Yoshimoto, Kousetsu*
- *Rakuyama, Jin (Temp.)*
- *Ryuuen, Kakeru*

Others:

Class A Adviser:

- *Chabashira, Sae*

Class B Adviser:

- *Mashima, Tomonari*

Class C Adviser:

- *Hoshinomiya, Chie*

Class D Adviser:

- *Sakagami, Kazuma*

Author's Notes:

I assigned temporary names for the rest of the students for convenience's sake.

Some new characters will also be introduced.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 1.1 - Summer is About to Begin

Summer... This should be the part where I reminisce some of my childhood summer memories, but unfortunately, I don't have anything like that.

It's now the 15th of August and all of the freshmen students just got back from their luxurious two-week cruise ship vacation. Of course, everyone knows how that went for us...

I was currently relaxing on my bed inside Room 401 of the 1st-year dormitory building. We disembarked very early in the morning so most students, including me, wanted to tidy up and rest up.

"Once again, I'm free..." I muttered.

I, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, value freedom more than anything. I want nothing more than to have a normal life in this school. Exceptional students wouldn't usually have that luxury given the class competitions and their responsibilities to lead their classmates. However, I'm also aware that I'm the strange one.

Katsuragi is the leader of Class A, but he chose to be in that position because he's been the type of guy to lead since he was younger. Ichinose is the leader of Class C because she wants to do her best for her friends and her dreams. Ryuen is the leader of Class D because he wanted to have fun beating the other leaders in the class competitions. And lastly, Horikita accepted my suggestion of her leading the class because she wanted to prove something. She wanted the recognition of her amazing brother.

Each one of them wouldn't have any doubts about being the leader of their own respective classes. Unfortunately, I'm not the same. The only reason why I led the class for the first four months was my desire to test myself. Now that we're in Class A, I have no more reason to participate in the upcoming battles. I just want to live as a regular student who isn't bothered by the pressures and expectations of performing exceptionally.

"What are you guys up to when we get back?" As we lined up to exit the ship, Ike asked the boys about their plans.

"Sleep," said Ueno.

Most of them mirrored his answer, which was understandable given

everything that we just went through.

"Are you doing the same, Kiyotaka-kun?" The girl beside me asked with a smile.

"Probably," I shrugged. "How about you, Ryuuko? Do you have any plans?"

"I wanna rest too, of course... But I might go out in the afternoon."

I didn't really ask my friends about their plans for the day and neither did they-- mainly because almost all of us were just thinking about resting.

I grabbed my phone and turned off all notifications. For now, I would like to have some peace of mind. Once September comes, we'll be labeled as the top class in our year. We'll also be rewarded with a large number of private points from our monthly allowance and previous special exam.

"Class A, huh...?"

Before putting my phone away, I noticed that I received some texts from some of my classmates. Based on the few words that I could read from the lock screen preview, they must've been asking about my decision to retire as the class's leader. I already asked Hirata and Kikyou to take care of the explanations. I'm sure it'll be fine.

From this day forth, I'm just Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-- a regular member of Class 1-A. Some amount of spotlight still shone on me given my academic performances, but I'll slowly tone everything down with time.

For now... I just want to sleep the day away. That's probably how I would want to start my very first summer in school.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 2.1 - A Normal Day Out

"It's getting pretty hot..."

Summer comes with the blazing heat of the sun. I can't really say much. That's just how it is during this season. I opted to go out in casual clothes, but apart from exposing more of my skin to the sun, nothing too drastic has changed.

"Let's eat here!"

"Okay, let's go!"

"I love this place!"

A group of senior girls happily passed by me as they went inside a restaurant in Keyaki Mall. They were all wearing summer clothes. People flooded the entire place mainly because we're in the heat of vacation, no pun intended. Students donning their casual wear could be seen anywhere I looked. I could only stand aside and observe them for now.

"Ah, you're here~!"

"Ohh, are those new clothes?"

Two girls called out as they approached me. They were classmates and close friends of mine-- Azuma Sana and Ichihashi Ruri.

"You can tell if it's new?"

"Girls have that ability. Didn't you know?" Ichihashi smirked in response.

I shook my head helplessly.

"You look good on it, though."

"Both of you look great, too," I returned the compliment.

I don't really have a great sense of fashion, and I didn't have time to buy my own clothes yesterday. That said, my savior, Hirata-sama, offered to buy me a set since he went out shopping with some friends in the afternoon. It's a good thing that the two of us have a similar build and I'm glad I let him do my bidding for this one.

"So you're the first one that arrived, huh? I'm sure they'll be here soon, though." Azuma looked around with a hum. "Ah-! Speak of the devil, there they are!"

It didn't take long before three more people came along. There were two guys and a girl-- Kikuchi Eita, Sugarawa Kazuto, and Nishimura Ryuuko.

(Head to the A/N section for Sugawara and Kikuchi's tentative

illustrations.)

"Yo," waved Sugawara.

"I thought you'd still be asleep today, Ayanokouji." Kikuchi slightly nudged my side.

"I considered that idea."

"Of course, you did."

I was actually invited to hang out with them last night, and I wouldn't really decline any invitations without a proper reason.

Our plans for today? Karaoke.

I managed to dodge this bullet on far too many occasions. It's finally time for me to pay my dues...

Inside the air-conditioned room, Azuma and Ichihashi started things off with a duet. Well, the song wasn't really supposed to be sung by two people, but they said it's their perk for singing first. Kikuchi got everyone's requests and ordered the food, while Ryuuko, Sugawara, and I cheered and chatted.

♪ *Sora wo oshi agete* ♪

♪ *Te wo nobasu kimi go-gatsu no koto* ♪

♪ *Douka kite hoshii* ♪

"I'm surprised you accepted their invitation," said Ryuuko.

Even if I was never explicit about it, I'm sure everyone felt that I didn't like karaoke, so her comment was reasonable.

"Yeah," followed Sugawara. "Kikuchi and I didn't really have our hopes up when we invited you, but hey, what a pleasant surprise."

"Well, I ought to try it out at least once," I responded with a shrug.

Kikuchi approached us with a smile. I'm sure he understood what we just talked about even though he was ordering the food-- along with the fact that Ichihashi and Azuma were singing passionately.

"We vowed to never blabber about you saying yes," he said.

"Huh? Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? If the girls in our class find out that you finally accepted an invitation for karaoke, they'd probably cancel their plans just to join us." Sugawara answered my question with an exhausted look.

"Oh..."

I'm sure that's an exaggeration but...

♪ *Kimi to suki na hito ga*

Hyakunen tsuduki masu you ni. ♪

"Woohoo, way to go, Ichihashi, Azuma!" cheered Sugawara.

"The two of you sang very well." Ryuuko complimented their singing with a smile.

"Ahaha, oh you~..." Azuma jokingly received her praise while

blushing.

"Your turn, Ryuuko." Ichihashi passed the mic to her.

"E-Ehh... Well, I guess I can go next."

"Ohh, do your best, Nishimura-san," cheered Kikuchi.

Sugawara and I mirror his cheer while clapping.

"♪ *I love you* ♪

♪ *Ima dake wa kanashii uta kikitakunai yo* ♪

"After her, it will be your turn, Ayanokouji," said Sugawara.

"That's fine. It's better to finish my suffering early."

"Ohh, how brave." Kikuchi leaned back with a smirk.

Azuma, who was cheering for Ryuuko suddenly looked at him to ask a question.

"We were all surprised that Ayanokouji-kun came with us today, but that also goes for you, Kikuchin."

"Oh, right. Don't you have any plans with Nene?" asked Ichihashi.

"Hmm, I think she's going out with Karuizawa-san and the others today. I'm not too sure, though."

"You're surprisingly laid back." Azuma tried to tease him. "You never know... She might actually be hanging out with other boys."

"Why wouldn't I be laid back? It's not like she's my girlfriend or anything. If she's hanging out with other guys, I'm not in any place to throw a tantrum. Worrying about it now would just spoil my day, so I'd rather get jealous on my own once I get back." Kikuchi smilingly shrugged her words off.

The maturity in his words never fails to mesmerize me. This was why Kikuchi was admired by the guys.

"You're awfully secure... What an eyesore..." joked Azuma.

"Aren't you the same, Sana-chan?" asked Ichihashi. "If we're talking about being laid back, you and Chiaki-chan would probably fit the bill the most."

"We're talking about romance here..." Azuma replied with a sigh.

"You know the worst part about that, Ichihashi? Both of them are academic achievers. It pisses me off," followed Sugawara.

"Now that I think about it, your grades are pretty excellent," I said.

"Haha, a laid-back star student applies to you too, Ayanokouji. A very enviable position." The relaxed Kikuchi retorted.

"Aren't you just discriminating against me at this point? It's just the vibe that I give. I led the class for four months, you know? I'm anything but laid back."

"Oho? But since you're stepping down as our class's leader, will you finally adopt the laid-back lifestyle?" asked Azuma.

"Yes," I nodded with a thumbs up.

"♪ *Kanashii uta ni* ♪

♪ *Ai ga shirakete* ♪

♪ *Shimawanu you ni* ♪"

"That was some great singing, Ryuuko!"

"Way to go, Nishimura-san!"

Ryuuko bashfully sat back.

"Great job out there," I said.

She turned to me with her usual smile.

"I heard you're next."

I just stood up and sighed in response. Alright, there's no going back now.

I chose a popular song that got even more popular due to an anime. I guess I'll be fine with singing that one.

The music started and I began reciting the lyrics in accordance with the tune.

♪ *Hiroi uchuu no kazu aru hitotsu* ♪

♪ *Aoi Chikyuu no hiroi sekai de* ♪"

I drowned my own voice with the music as my friends cheered for me.

I started giving it some focus and felt time pass by.

"Ahh, I'm full! I regret eating some snacks before going out," said Azuma.

It was almost time for us to leave. My friends sang a lot while I only sang three songs.

"You don't look full, Sana."

"Oh, don't flatter her, Ryuuko. She'd get annoyingly haughty if you compliment her figure," said Ichihashi.

"She does have a nice figure, though."

"Ehehe, thanks, Ryuuko~." Azuma scratched her cheek while chuckling like an old man. "I don't have big boobs, though."

"No one asked, Sana-chan." Ichihashi rolled her eyes.

"Shut it, Ruri. Just because your boobs are big doesn't mean I can't-"

"They're not! And stop talking about such an embarrassing topic."

Ryuuko just giggled while listening to their banter.

"Hmm~? Is it because some guys are around? Don't worry, they like overhearing these kinds of topics." Azuma turned to us with a teasing smile. "Am I right boys? Or is this too stimulating for you?"

"W-W-What-? N-No way!" Sugawara stammered whilst trying to deny her words.

"Dude..."

Kikuchi and I looked at him with saddened expressions.

"What?!! Am I the weird one now? Aren't the two of you just acting abnormally calm?"

"Huh? Well, I'm probably just used to hearing these things. I was close friends with a lot of girls back in junior high." Kikuchi seriously answered his question while munching on some fries.

"I guess I can say that I'm a bit similar."

It's only now that I'm in high school, though.

"Man... Curse you and your valuable experiences on the battlefield."

"It's fine, Sugawara-kun. Their reactions are boring, unlike yours. You get plus points for being amusing," smirked Azuma.

"Plus points because I'm easy to make fun of, huh? How depressing..."

My condolences, Sugawara.

"Ah, speaking of which, what's Kikyou-chan up to?" Ichihashi looked at me and Ryuuko.

At that moment, Kikuchi and Sugawara started chatting about a different topic.

"I actually have no idea," I replied, shaking my head.

"If I remember correctly, I think she's hanging out with Kokoro-chan and Mii-chan. I don't know where, though," answered Ryuuko.

"I see... I wonder if it's not a bother to call her later. I wanted to talk to her about something."

"It's Kikyou. I'm sure it'll be fine." Ryuuko dismissed her worries with a smile.

"Oh, right, Ayanokouji-kun. How's Sakura-chan doing with her photo contest?"

"I'm sure she made some progress. She even asked some advice from other people."

"Ehh, that's nice. I'm glad she's starting to crawl out of her shy shell."

"Photo contest?" Ryuuko tilted her head curiously.

Since Azuma and I were talking, Ichihashi answered the question for her.

"If I remember correctly, Sakura-chan entered a photo contest held by the Photography Club and the Student Council. She asked Sana-chan to be her subject with the theme being 'Summer'."

"Ohh, that's pretty nice. I'd love to see her entry."

"I'm sure the winner's entry will be put on display. If Sakura-chan wins, we'll see Sana-chan's picture on the main bulletin board at school."

"I hope she wins!"

"Yeah."

"She'd have more chances of winning if she asked Kushida-chan

to be her subject instead of me, though..." Azuma chimed in on their conversation, dramatically putting on a sad face.

"You're just making advanced excuses once Sakura-chan loses because of you." Ichihashi teased her with a nudge.

"Agh-! How harsh."

"Airi told me that she just really likes your smile." There's also her goal of making a connection between Haruka and Ichihashi, but they don't need to know that.

"Aww, that's so sweet of her~."

At that moment, Azuma's phone vibrated from her pocket.

"Ah, what a coincidence! Sakura-chan told me that her entry was almost finished. She asked if I could come to her room tomorrow and take a look."

I read up on the rules for the contest. A large portion of the points was equally distributed for both the actual technique and photo manipulation. I don't know how experienced Airi was with photo editing, but with Professor's help, I'm sure she can pull through.

"I'm really excited. You should go with me, Ruri."

"Sure, if Sakura-chan is okay with it."

"Oh, could you ask her if it's alright for me to come along? I want to see her work as well."

"Of course. If it's not a bother to her, then we can all go together."

At that moment, the two guys called for me.

"Hey, Ayanokouji, are you free tomorrow?" asked Sugawara.

"I think so. Why?"

"Ike and Miyamoto asked if we wanted to hang out. They probably want to play some multiplayer game again."

"I'm fine with going. How about you, Kikuchi?"

"I'll pass. I've got some work to do with Setsuya and Kiyoshi tomorrow."

Minami and Onizuka?

"If I remember correctly, you're all in the same tutor group with Yukimura. Are you planning to do your summer homework tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he shrugged. "It's a pain, but it'll be better for us in the long run. Our boss is really strict with his policies, too."

"That's Yukimura for you," chuckled Sugawara.

"How about you, Sugawara-kun? Our tutor might not have planned anything, but you can't delay your homework for too long, you know?"

Ryuuko addressed him with a concerned look. They were in the same group, after all.

"I-I know... I don't want to trouble Mii-chan, as well. It's just that,

uhh, yeah, I'm just not in the mood yet. Ahaha..."

You don't sound convincing at all, dude.

"Sigh... Well, it's not like I can really say anything right now. I don't think any of us are in the mood to do school stuff anyway... Not after all of *that*."

Of course, all of us knew that she was talking about the special exams.

The six of us finally decided to separate. The three girls planned to go to Keyaki Mall while the other two had some business in the commercial district. I'm the only one who chose to call it a day.

"See you next time, Ayanokouji-kun! You were great at singing!" said Azuma, sarcastically.

"Shut up."

"It's wasn't that bad for your first time, though."

"Thanks."

"I get told off but Ryuuko gets a thank you?! Aren't you being too cold on me, Ayanokouji-kun?!"

"Now, now. I'm glad I could hang out with you guys today. I really had fun," said Ichihashi.

"Yeah, me too. We certainly formed some sort of ragtag group, but I had a great time, regardless." Kikuchi followed with a smile.

"Of course, the same goes for me," added Sugawara.

After heading back, I decided to finish all of my summer homework. That way, I can do more stuff without worrying about anything. I've gone out with my friends a lot during the weekends, but this one felt different due to my current position in the class. And to be honest, I don't dislike it at all.

Author's Notes:

Here are references for Sugawara and Kikuchi's looks.

- Sugawara Kazuto tentative illust. (can't trace it to the original artist).

- Kikuchi Eita tentative illust. (can't trace it to the original artist).

- His looks belong to Nagisa Kaworu from Evangelion.

Ruri and Sana sang **Hanamizuki** by Hitoto Yo. Ryuuko sang **I Love You** by Ozaki Yutaka. Kiyotaka sang **Chiisana Koi no Uta** by Mongol800 (though it got more popular due to the song being an ED for

the Karakai Jouzo no Takagi-san anime, sang by Takahashi Rie).

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 3.1 - A Warning

Because I went to the karaoke yesterday, I figured that I'd spend this day resting inside my room. Well, at least that's what I initially planned to do. I was wrong.

"Why did he even call for me...?"

"To be honest, I have no idea."

Horikita and I wore our uniforms as we walked on school grounds. The sleeves of my blazer made my arms sweat beads. It felt extremely uncomfortable.

That said, Horikita led me towards a room for a certain club. From what I've heard, it seems like the Student Council Office was currently under renovation, so moving to a temporary location would make a lot of sense.

"Tea Ceremony Club, huh?" I commented.

"I heard they were stationed in the Floral Arrangement Club until yesterday," added Horikita.

Knock

"Come in."

I opened the door for us after hearing confirmation from the guy himself. He sat on a chair behind a school desk. It felt kinda weird given how I usually saw him seated behind an office desk.

"Tachibana, go brew some tea for them."

"Yes, President."

Secretary Tachibana got to work as she went behind a small curtain separating the room in half.

"Have a seat, you two."

"You're being strangely hospitable. What are you up to this time?"

Clutter

After uttering those rude words, I could immediately hear some mess behind the curtain.

"Tachibana, is everything alright?"

"Y-Yes, President! I apologize for my carelessness!"

"Be mindful. The members of the Tea Ceremony Club were kind enough to let us borrow their room. It would be shameful if we cause any amount of damage to their equipment."

"Yes, I'm very sorry!"

Horikita Manabu fixed his glasses before turning back to us.

"To answer your question, I'm not necessarily planning anything."

I called you here with regards to your recent achievement as the freshmen year's new Class A." He then looked towards Horikita. "Congratulations. As the Student Council President of this school, I've acknowledged your efforts."

"Nii-san..."

"I can't deny that results are results. What your class has achieved is nothing short of a miracle." He narrowed his eyes before continuing. "However, I hope none of this gets to your head."

"That much is obvious, Nii-san... We will not get conceited."

"Hmph." *"We"*, huh? Suzune, how confident are you that you represent your classmates?"

"That's..."

He instantly dismantled Horikita's composure. Horikita Manabu knew his sister more than anyone else. He knew that this was nothing but a temporary feat.

"I don't think underestimating us is a good congratulatory speech, you know?" I chimed in.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not underestimating your class's *"potential"*. But everything else is still subpar compared to what is required from a stable Class A. You're the first-ever Class D that rose to Class A-- in one semester, no less. Questions are bound to rise."

His evaluation was on point. As a fellow freshman, I sincerely think that the likes of Katsuragi or Ichinose's classes are still leaps and bounds better in terms of overall merit.

"What types of questions?"

"There are lots of different questions that could be asked, but given your current progress and achievements, there's one question that stands out." He gave me an extremely sharp look. *"Who was responsible for this?"*

Horikita looked at me with a slightly anxious expression.

"I may have had a hand in the Island Exam, but Horikita was the MVP during the Zodiac Exam. The credit can't be all mine."

"Is that really the case, though? Let me ask you, Suzune."

"I..."

Of course, she won't agree with me. I made Horikita realize how inferior she was compared to the other leaders. Given how sharp she is, she must've felt that I did something in the background during the Zodiac Exam, too. She may have been the MVP on the surface, but her intuition is telling her that I might've used her as a pawn once again.

"Putting the special exams aside, the main feat that solidified your position could be traced back to the very first day of school."

"You're talking about me buying the explanation for the S-System, right?"

"Naturally. You see, the school's unique system didn't have its own culture back then. Even after revealing it, competitions remained tight. However, because of the obvious stigma and prejudice brought on by the class hierarchy, none of the lower classes managed to win in the end. Some Class Cs made it to Class B, but not a single Class D managed to overtake any higher class," he explained. "This gave birth to the current discriminatory culture that's been around for a decade or so. I'm sure you've heard of the term '*defects*' thrown around here and there. As time passed by, the defeat of the lower classes had become more set in stone. Because of the class hierarchy, the difference in morale between the lower classes and upper classes had always been day and night. That's especially hard to fix when most students hailing in Class D are flawed, immature children who can't think past their own foolish desires."

The elder Horikita stopped talking and took a sip of his tea. He must've felt that the situation on the other side of the curtain has been settled.

"The tea is ready. Please, have some."

As expected, Secretary Tachibana came back to serve us some tea.

"Thank you," said Horikita.

"Don't mind it," she replied with a smile.

"Thank you."

"You're *very* welcome." Her smile turned into a frown before looking away.

The difference in treatment here is quite evident.

"Nii-san... May I ask why you're telling us all of this?"

"I'm just opening your eyes to the truth. 290 points, 260 points, 180 points, 110 points, and so on-- those are some examples of the amount of class points that past Class Ds initially had. They were the ones who went through the process normally-- the ones who stayed ignorant to the truth until the 1st of May," he said. "Meanwhile, your class started with a good 720 class points boosting you all the way to Class B after the first month. This shook the school, and your adviser was even investigated for foul play. It's only natural that the one responsible for this abnormal situation... is an abnormal person himself. Do you get what I'm saying, Suzune?"

"If Ayanokouji-kun didn't make Chabashira-sensei explain the S-System to our class, the likelihood of us still being Class D even after the Zodiac Exam would be very high. That's what you're trying to say, right, Nii-san?"

(Note: Suzune is using very formal language in all her lines with Manabu.)

Matsushita, Horikita, Kikyou, and even Hirata have consulted this

theory with each other, including me. Our educated guess told us that there's a good chance for our initial class points to drop all the way down to **zero** if it weren't for that purchased explanation. With that in mind, the amount of class points that we have would only amount to 492 even after winning both the Deserted Island Exam and the Zodiac Exam. Being almost 200 points behind Ryuuen's 690, we would still end up as Class D after the first semester.

"Well, figuring out that buying intangible things with points isn't something that a normal person would think about right after coming to this school. From the marketing to how the school presents itself, every student would've been successfully manipulated into having materialistic thoughts. I'm not just crediting Ayanokouji for overcoming the school's very first test. This also goes for both Katsuragi Kouhei and Sakayanagi Arisu."

"940 points... Was there any other Class A in the past who had the same or more amount of class points as them after April?" asked Horikita.

"No. This year's Class 1-A set a record."

Horikita had a subtly graver look.

"Nii-san... How did your class do back then?"

"You're curious about that? How unnecessary." The elder Horikita fixed his glasses as he answered. "When we were freshmen, our Class 1-A managed to hold on to 920 class points."

Meanwhile, Secretary Tachibana nodded with a bright smile on her face.

"So you figured out the System, too, huh?" I commented.

"More or less. Fortunately, I didn't have to sacrifice any of our points to convince the class. As you've seen from the past rankings, the previous Class A was the same. It clearly showcases the difference in fundamental maturity between classes." Horikita Manabu ended with a sigh. "Do you get what I'm trying to say?"

"Yes..."

The elder Horikita turned to me once again before changing the topic.

"After checking the files of your first special exams, a development has got me intrigued. The sudden turn of events led me to suspect that you're planning to step down, Ayanokouji."

"So you figured even *that* out, huh...? Well, it's not like I was hiding it. You're right that I'm no longer the leader of Class B... or rather, Class A. Everything is now in Horikita's hands, along with Hirata and the others."

"I see. You're not the first person I've associated with that just wants to live a normal high school life in this school. I suppose I can understand where you're coming from."

Secretary Tachibana smiled bitterly after hearing those words.

"Students from your class?"

"Yes. They don't care too much about the class competitions, but they're competent enough to not be a burden. I hope you're planning to do the same. It would be shameful if you were reduced into being dead weight."

"I don't plan to become a freeloader. If everyone in the class hates me for it, then I'd be getting the opposite of a peaceful life."

"A peaceful life, huh? I suppose that's true," he smirked meaningfully. "That's all I wanted to say for now as the Student Council President and a fellow representative of Class A. You're dismissed. Tachibana, kindly escort them out."

"I understand."

While Horikita and I were walking through the hallways on our way to the teachers' faculty, her phone suddenly made a sound.

"It's a message from Hirata-kun. He's with Kushida-san and they want to talk to me about something. Apparently, it's urgent."

"Ohh... That means you have to go now, right?"

"Here, Ayanokouji-kun. Please send these additional reports to Chabashira-sensei in my place." She handed her folder to me with an apologetic expression. "Well then."

And just like that, Horikita was gone. I headed towards the faculty room all by myself.

As I turned towards the last corner, I accidentally bumped into another student.

"Oh, sorry."

"Ah, no. It was me who was careless--" Both of us instinctively apologized before recognizing each other's faces and voices. "Eh, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Ichinose?"

"Hey! Do you have some business with your adviser?"

"Yeah, how about you?"

"Oh, Hoshinomiya-sensei called for me, but she told me that I'll hear the specifics from the student council."

Apparently, the reason why she had to visit the teachers' faculty was so Hoshinomiya-sensei can inform her about their new temporary office.

"Alright, I'll go now. Let's hang out sometime during summer, okay?"

"Sure."

And with that, I gave my report to Chabashira-sensei.

I was curious as to what Ichinose's business was. Horikita Manabu once said that he didn't find any of the first-years to be particularly

impressive, so calling for Ichinose now would be a bit strange.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 4.1 - Shopping Date

(20:14) [Next Tuesday?]

(20:16) [Yes.]

(20:16) [Kokoro-chan's birthday is on the 24th, so I want to buy a gift as soon as now.]

(20:24) [Alright.]

(20:24) [I can come with you.]

(20:24) [It'd be nice to get some ideas since I also plan to buy her a gift.]

(20:25) [Okay!]

(20:25) [Let's go tomorrow.]

And after that, we agreed to meet up somewhere in Keyaki Mall. I waited for her arrival before noon because we also planned to eat lunch outside.

"Kiyotaka-kun~!"

The cheery Kikyou finally appeared. She wore a shawl-like pastel orange open blouse on top of a light lemon yellow one-piece dress with pink ends. It was a casual outfit that was perfect for shopping in the summer.

In a similar vein, I also wore casual clothes. It was different from what I wore the other day, but it'll do for today's trip to the mall.

"Hey."

With my horrendous attempt at making a cool reply, Kikyou and I finally met up to look for a birthday gift.

We were inside a shop that was clearly targeted towards the female demographic and lovey-dovey couples. Its pink interior emphasized this effect after seeing all the available products. From stuffed animals to keychains and cosmetics, this shop was the perfect place to buy gifts for a high school girl.

"Well, I'll be in your care."

"Leave it to me! I'm sure she'll like the present we'll choose for her."

A guy and a girl going out on a normal summer day. In other words, a date. Yeah, this probably counts as a date. Of course, this wasn't the first time I've gone out with Kikyou, so I should probably get used to it now.

All of the rewards from the special exams were scheduled to be distributed on the 1st of September, so it's good that we still had a

lot of leftover private points to spend. Well, that's quite an understatement. The monthly allowance received by our class was already more than enough for any student.

"Hmm, I wonder what I should buy her~?"

"Does Inogashira like accessories, by any chance?"

"Well, she doesn't *'like'* them per se, but if you decide to give her one, I'm sure she'd still appreciate it."

"I see... But I still think it would be better to give her something practical."

"Ah~! That's the route you're going for? Hmm... Then I recommend giving her this~!"

Kikyou reached out for a small item that was coincidentally on the aisle that we were checking out.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Oh, you don't know? This is called a lip balm. They protect your lips by preventing water loss."

I took the item and scrutinized the visible interior.

"So it contains some sort of moisturizing ingredient?"

"Yes! Like petroleum jelly or lanolin, for example."

I see. Girls really are particular with these things, huh? Though I guess men could also use it.

"Alright, I'll buy this. Thanks, Kikyou."

"You're welcome~."

Our shopping was pretty much uninterrupted because we didn't bump into anyone that we knew. The other customers at that time were all seniors. Well, that's what we initially believed before meeting a familiar face at the exit.

"Hm? Ayanokouji and Kushida?"

"Katsuragi-kun?"

Class A's Katsuragi Kouhei, donning a school uniform in this heat, arrived at the shop.

"Hey, Katsuragi-kun~! What are you doing here? Are you shopping for something, like a present for someone?"

Him being here can't really mean too many things. I pretty much had the same thought as Kikyou.

"Yes, something like that," he nodded before eyeing the two of us.

"Are you two on a date, perhaps? Ah, forgive me if I'm jumping to conclusions."

Kikyou looked at me with a smirk, refusing to answer.

"Well, we were doing some birthday gift-shopping for a friend, but since we plan to eat and maybe hang out after, then I guess you could call it a date." I shrugged before returning the question to him. "How about you? Who are you buying a present for?"

"Hmm..." Katsuragi might not have expected me to answer

properly, so he was doubtful about returning the favor.

"Is the question too personal? If so, then forget I asked."

He's always been a vigilant individual. I could understand why he'd refuse to answer my question.

"No, it's fine. You were kind enough to respond to my question, so it'd be rude if I don't respond to yours," he sighed. "You see, I'm buying a birthday gift for my twin sister."

"Ohh, I didn't know you had a twin sister, Katsuragi-kun. Your birthday's on the 29th, right? Are you planning to celebrate it with any of your friends?" Kikyou asked enthusiastically.

"I don't really plan on celebrating my birthday." Katsuragi's facial expression turned grim as he continued. "That said, how did you even know that my birthday is on the 29th?"

"Ah, I asked for everyone's contact info back at the ship, right? You can see your birthdate on there." Kikyou swiftly grabbed her phone and showed him the screen after a couple of taps. "See?"

Kikyou openly displayed her own contact information to Katsuragi without any regard for caution.

"I suppose that makes sense." Seeing Kikyou's reckless actions made Katsuragi drop his guard a bit. "Well then, I wouldn't want to get in your way. You too, Ayanokouji."

"Yeah, good luck with finding your sister a gift."

"Bye-bye, Katsuragi-kun!"

Kikyou and I walked out of the shop without much issue.

"See? I told you that we'd have no trouble shopping. It's better to get ourselves as hungry as possible before eating lunch!"

"Isn't that a dangerous mindset...?"

"I'm kidding, of course~!"

After having lunch, Kikyou and I went to go see a movie. This time, however, we've decided to go for an anime movie.

"Hm? Wasn't this movie in cinemas last year?" mused Kikyou.

"Yeah. If I remember correctly, it was around Christmas."

I remember Professor mentioning that detail when he was looking through the reviews from overseas. Apparently, the movie aired in cinemas sometime in July in other countries.

"Well, I guess they're just trying to fill in the slots. I haven't watched this movie yet, so I guess we can go see it if you haven't as well," she said.

"Alright, let's go."

August 18th, 3:34 PM

"Ahh~! That was so good! Did you like the movie, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"Yeah, I did."

I genuinely did. Seeing the main female character strive and be able to explore the outside world despite being bound by her disability made me feel a sense of camaraderie.

"Ah-! Kikyou-chan's on a date~!"

Before we could have a deeper conversation about the said movie, two unfamiliar female students suddenly called out to us.

"Iida-senpai and Konishi-senpai...?"

"Hehe, were you caught off-guard? We could see you two being all lovey-dovey from the top seats, you know?"

"I see~. So this is Kikyou-chan's boyfriend, huh? Nice to meet you, I'm Konishi Yua, from Class 3-A."

"I'm Iida Aoi, from Class 3-A, as well. You're Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun, right?"

"Yes, uh... Nice to meet you...?"

How did they...?

"You know who Kiyotaka-kun is, Senpai?"

"Yep! I think Horikita-kun mentioned his name one time. That guy never talks about the first-year students, so if he says even one name, I'd probably remember it," replied Iida-senpai.

Her citrine eyes immediately made her stand out along with the pale blue gradient at the end of her shoulder-length black hair. She immediately exuded the energy of a strong-headed and energetic person.

"That's probably just you, Aoi... I just remembered his name after you mentioned it," followed Konishi-senpai.

On the other hand, Konishi-senpai's blond hair and aquamarine eyes caught my eye. Her prim and proper style of fashion probably mirrored her jolly yet gentle nature.

"So the two of you watched the movie, too?"

"Well, yeah. I've watched the movie before, but Yua said she hasn't seen it yet, so we decided to give it a go. We didn't expect to spot you on a date with your boyfriend, though."

"Uh, Senpai, I think there's a misunderstanding here. Kikyou and I aren't in that kind of relationship."

My words instantly caught their attention.

"Ara, is that so? I wouldn't have followed up on Yua's assumption, but neither of you denied it immediately, so..."

"Weren't you the first one who assumed their relationship earlier? You were so confident that I just believed you..." Konishi-senpai smiled bitterly, side-eyeing her.

"Now, now. If I also happened to see a boy and girl going out to see a romantic movie, I'd probably be in the same mindset as you, Senpai. I don't think it's a big deal," said Kikyou.

"So you're on a date but you're not dating each other, huh? I see, I see," Iida-senpai nodded repeatedly.

"Did you go out shopping?" asked Konishi-senpai, seeing the bag that I was holding on to.

"Yes-- for a birthday gift, to be exact. I wanted to buy one at an early date while Kiyotaka-kun needed help with choosing. That's why we decided to go out today, just the two of us." Kikyou answered her question with solid support.

"In other words, your interests aligned. How efficient, as expected of Kikyou-chan."

"Ahh! Are you perhaps the *'best friend'* that the guys are talking about?!" exclaimed Iida-senpai.

"Aoi, you're getting too riled up now." Konishi-senpai held her shoulders with a bitter laugh.

"A-Ah... My bad..."

Taking the conversation to a more appropriate place, the four of us decided to hang out at the food court.

"I'm really sorry if we're being a couple of nosy tagalongs to your date." Iida-senpai apologized while sipping on her milk tea.

"It's fine, Iida-senpai. Kiyotaka-kun and I were supposed to go home after watching the movie, anyway."

"Is that true, Ayanokouji-kun? Or is Kikyou-chan just trying to be nice to Aoi again?" Meanwhile, Konishi-senpai asked me in a suspecting tone.

"It's true. Apart from shopping and grabbing lunch together, we didn't really plan to do anything else. Watching a movie was an impromptu idea after we noticed that we finished everything too quickly. It's not like the two of us had any other plans, anyway."

"I see~."

"On that note, Senpai, what were you talking about earlier?" asked Kikyou.

"About the best friends thingy?"

"Mn," she nodded. "You see, most of the students in our year recognize Kiyotaka-kun as my best friend. I don't know much about the upper levels, though."

"You might not know about this, Kikyou-chan, but you're also quite the hot topic for the 3rd-year guys. Well, that's always been the case for every cute girl that enrolls here, but a number of boys from our year still have their eyes on you," explained Konishi-senpai.

"Ehh... Is that the case?"

"Yep~! And of course, since we don't really have a lot of time left to get to know our kouhais, there's no way for them to know about your circle of friends in detail," she explained. "Ah, but it would

make sense that you're around your other handsome classmate--uh--"

"Hirata-kun?"

"Yeah, yeah, Hirata-kun from the Soccer Club-- He's also been a topic for some senior girls... apart from that other boy called Kouenji, of course. That guy had been playing around with the girls from other classes." Iida-senpai rolled her eyes in boredom. "Anyway, no one in our year knows about Ayanokouji-kun, so it came off as a surprise whenever you two are seen together. As time went on, the boys just labeled him as the *'best friend'* who's super close to you."

I don't know if the fact that they didn't even bother learning my name was something that I should be sad about or be thankful for.

"Hmm... I guess that makes sense. Ayanokouji-kun is very popular in our year, but I don't think anyone in the senior classes would know about him." Kikyou looked at me for support.

"Maybe...? I'm not sure if I'm properly following this topic, but if you're curious about my connections with the seniors, I practically have none. Unlike Hirata or the other popular guys, I'm not in any clubs. And I'm not outgoing like Kikyou or Ichinose, for example. I only really hang out with my classmates."

"I see~. That makes a lot of sense," smiled Konishi-senpai. "Thanks for entertaining our gossip chitchat, and sorry for Aoi being nosy."

"Eh-?! I'm the only one?!"

Kikyou chuckled before turning to me.

"They're good senpais. They're the ones who looked after me during my early days here in school."

"Ahh, I think you've mentioned them before. Were they the ones who invited you to their club?" I also remember Kikyou's side-comment about one senpai being annoyingly persistent. She must've been talking about Iida-senpai. "If I remember correctly, one was the Volleyball Club while the other was the Tea Ceremony Club."

"I'm from the Volleyball Club! I'm taking care of Nene-chan," replied Iida-senpai.

Mori was a member of the volleyball club, so it makes sense for them to know each other.

"I'm the president of the Tea Ceremony Club," followed Konishi-senpai.

If I remember correctly, the student council president temporarily stayed in the Tea Ceremony Club's room.

"I'm surprised you remember, Kiyotaka-kun. It's not like they were the only clubs that I talked about."

"Well, those two were the only clubs that you talked about in

tandem."

"Hm?" Iida-senpai grabbed her phone after feeling a vibration in her pocket. "Ahh... Speak of the devil, Maika-chan and the others are calling for me. They want to have an emergency meeting for the club."

"Is everything alright, Iida-senpai?" Kikyou asked with a concerned look.

"It'll be fine. The tournament is coming up, so I'm sure they're just a bit nervous." Iida-senpai got up and bid her farewell. "I'll be going on ahead. Don't bother them too much, okay, Yua?"

"I'm not like you, Aoi. We'll be fine over here," she waved with a gentle smile. "Tell everyone I said hi."

And there she goes.

"She might act like that, but Aoi's a lot more mature than she lets on."

"Her teammates seem to rely on her," commented Kikyou.

"They do. In sports clubs, class divisions don't matter. You're all allies in one team. It's different from the hostile atmosphere of special exams. I'm sure you can understand what I'm saying by now."

"Yes, we do..." Kikyou nodded melancholically. "Did your class have it hard?"

"Oh, our class? If I'm being honest, I think we have it a lot easier compared to the other Class As in the past. Horikita-kun is just too amazing. For flow riders like me and Aoi, all we had to do was not hold the class back," Konishi-senpai answered with a smile. "Through his efforts, we were able to have a pretty great high school experience. Our class will be forever thankful because of that."

"I see. That's really nice, isn't it, Senpai?"

"Fufun~, but it's not over yet, Kikyou-chan. Class B could still overtake us, so we can't just laze around. That goes for you guys, too, who just became the newest Class A for your year."

"Y-Yes! We'll do our best!"

"That's right. Let's do our best as fellow Class A students, okay?"

August 18th, 5:02 PM.

"Our dorm is this way, so we'll have to say goodbye now."

In the end, we hung out with Konishi-senpai until it was finally time to head back.

"Let's hang out again some time, Kikyou-chan. And it was nice meeting you too, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I would love to hang out with you again, Senpai," replied Kikyou.

Meanwhile, I just responded with a nod.

Kikyou and I walked towards the first-year dorm's lobby after separating with Konishi-senpai. After a silent trip inside the elevator, I parted ways with Kikyou while heading off on the 4th floor.

"Thanks a lot for today, Kikyou."

"Don't mention it, Kiyotaka-kun. I'm the one who asked for your company, anyway."

I got inside my room after Kikyou and I exchanged our goodbyes.

After doing my daily routine of checking messages, I finally collapsed onto my bed.

"A great high school experience, huh...? I wonder if I could have that at all?"

Author's Notes:

The shop is canon.

Kokoro's birthday was mentioned to be on a Wednesday. Given Kinu-sensei's never-consistent date management, that didn't match up with the LN's explicitly mentioned school year, which was 2015. August 24th being on a Wednesday applies to both the year 2016 and 2017, though. This makes sense given how Kinu-sensei is known to slap his dates using the year that of a volume's release date (Volume 1 was released in 2015 while Volume 4.5 was released in 2016).

That said, while the Alter timeline isn't specific with its year, I'm still using the 2021 calendar for Year 1. This moved the 24th of August to a Tuesday instead, as mentioned at the start.

"Naruhodo ne~." -Konishi Yua

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 5.1 - In Good Hands

August 22nd, 11:30 AM.

I was currently walking out of the dorm building while writing out a very long message. After pressing the send button, the voice of a female classmate called out to me.

"Hey, Kiyotaka-kun!"

"Ryuuko?" I turned around and saw her wearing our school uniform like me.

"Are you on your way to school now? It's still pretty early, you know?"

"Yeah, I didn't have anything better to do inside my room, anyway," I replied. "How about you?"

"I'm heading there now, as well."

Eh? But why did you sound surprised about my decision if you're doing the same thing...?

"Then let's just go together."

"Mn," she nodded.

Students who had business inside the school building were required to wear their uniforms. That said, there are times when fashionistas like Karuizawa or Satou refuse to wear their blazers even during normal school days. Fortunately, it wasn't strictly against the rules, however.

"It's rare for you to not wear your blazer. But given this heat, I guess it would make sense."

Seeing her get-up made me remove my blazer, too. I folded it properly as we walked and put it inside my bag. I also rolled my sleeves up so my forearm doesn't get too sweaty.

"Some girls might want to endure, but I don't sweat easily, so I'll be fine."

"Endure? I thought you'd be enduring more if you wear it."

Ryuuko smiled bitterly like she was looking at an innocent child. At that moment, I knew I missed something.

"Summer in Japan will indiscriminately make us sweat no matter what we wear. As a girl, do you think it's better to sweat while covered by a dark-colored blazer, or a thin, white blouse?"

Airi was worried about the same thing when Haruka convinced her to swim in the river. She said that it's embarrassing because the clothing will become transparent, showing her undergarments.

"I see... I get it now."

"Yep."

Before I could shift my gaze forward, Ryuuko drew closer and softly called out to me. She lightly grabbed my right sleeve, looking at me with her violet eyes.

"I'm an exception, see? Despite the heat, I won't start sweating unless the surrounding becomes humid. This breeze certainly helps a lot."

The summer breeze surely helped keep our sweat glands in control for now. But once the day reaches its peak, I'm sure even Ryuuko wouldn't be able to resist the heat. It's probably the reason why she opted to head there early.

"Good for you, I guess. I don't have that power."

"Fufun~. It's quite amazing, isn't it?" Ryuuko's smile turned stiff. "But the cold is a different thing, though... It's my weakness. I even tend to get sick whenever the season shifts."

"So your power comes with a weakness, huh? I personally don't have a problem with the cold. It's the perk of being in the neutral zone."

The two of us talked like usual as we walked in the main school building's direction.

Now, why would we go to school at this time? Wasn't it summer vacation? I wasn't a member of any club and neither was Ryuuko. Chabashira-sensei didn't call for us, either.

Well, you see, it all happened two days ago when the class finally started talking about dividing the rewards.

(20:25) [I understand.]

(20:25) [We'll have the meeting the day after tomorrow, on the 22nd.]

(20:25) [Is that alright with everyone?] (Hirata)

(20:25) [I'm with Hirata-kun.] (Kushida)

(20:26) [Let's do it!] (Karuizawa)

The class voiced their agreement right after.

(20:33) [Everyone just needs to come.]

(20:34) [We've already taken care of the required formalities.]

(20:34) [Just please be sure to wear your uniforms.] (Horikita)

(20:34) [Horikita-san will be overseeing the meeting with me.]

(20:34) [We've already gotten permission from Chabashira-sensei to use the classroom.] (Hirata)

(20:34) [Of course.]

(20:34) [We'll talk about everything in detail by that time.] (Horikita)

The class group chat was awfully convenient. All hail technology.

Before I could close my phone, I suddenly received a message from Horikita.

(20:34) [Are you coming?]

(20:34) [Probably.]

(20:34) [I understand.]

(20:34) [Way to go, leader.]

After staring at my phone for a solid minute, I've concluded that Horikita will not be replying anymore. I'll never forget the trauma of getting completely ghosted after sending a light-hearted message.

"Ah, Kiyotaka-kun, Ryuuko-chan, you came!" yelled Kikyuu.

When Ryuuko and I got to the classroom, there were already a bunch of people inside. It wasn't even the usual early birds that we saw. Ike, Yamauchi, Hondou, and Miyamoto, members of the "barely-made-it-in-time" group, were already inside the room.

Kikyuu ran up to me with a bitter smile. Her facial expression told me that she was running away.

"Oh, Ayanokouji! Hey there! Nishimura, too!" waved Ike.

The other three followed suit. After responding to them, I turned my attention towards Kikyuu. I suddenly grabbed her shoulders and drew my face close.

"Eh...? Kiyotaka-kun?" Kikyuu called bashfully.

Even Ryuuko was shocked by my actions. However, I needed to do this if I wanted an accurate evaluation.

"Don't mind it. I'm just trying to find something out from their reactions," I whispered.

"I-Is that so...?" Kikyuu responded in the same volume.

"Hey, what are you guys whispering about over there?!" Ike asked loudly.

"Engaging in PDA as soon as you get here... Have you no shame?!" followed Yamauchi.

"You're not even dating! Or wait... Are you?" Miyamoto, who wanted to add something, unintentionally confused himself.

I see...

I let go of Kikyuu and turned away.

"I'll be talking to Hirata and Horikita. There's still a bit of time before everyone gets here, anyway."

"O-Okay..." Kikyuu chuckled awkwardly before looking at Ryuuko. "Why don't we go ahead to wait for Mii-chan and the others?"

"Yeah..." Ryuuko responded with question marks still visible on top of her head.

I approached Horikita who was already looking at me. Her narrowed eyes judged my very presence.

"So you came, after all."

"Did you not want me to?"

"No, why would you think that?"

I actually didn't. I'm already used to her distant and cold tone.

"I'm kidding," I replied, shaking my head.

Hirata stood up from his seat after putting away some documents and greeted me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, I'm glad you came."

"You guys called for the whole class, after all."

"Ahaha, I don't think Kouenji-kun would stop by, though."

"His attendance matter not. He'll probably get the reward money on his own," said Horikita.

Time passed by and the classroom finally started getting packed with the students of Class A. All 39 of us (Kouenji excluded) settled down using our seating arrangement for the first semester. This will probably be the last time that I'd be seated beside Horikita... or not. Her seat was currently empty. She and Hirata were in front of the classroom where all of our attention was directed.

"Good afternoon, everyone. First of all, thank you for taking your time to attend this meeting despite being on vacation." Hirata started off strong with his speech. "Horikita-san and I have called you here to discuss the rewards from the Zodiac Exam."

He ended his turn after glancing at Horikita.

"I've done the math for the division of rewards. If you look at our class group chat, I sent an image containing the amount of private points that each student will be getting," she said.

"Ohh..." Our classmates started observing the simple table that Horikita sent.

"As you can see, the division will inevitably be unequal, but that's just the reality of things given the nature of how the groups were formed." Horikita grabbed a piece of chalk and started writing stuff on the blackboard. "For example, Onodera-san, Wang-san, Miyake-kun, and Yamauchi-kun were all part of the Rooster Group. The reward money; 500,000 private points, will be distributed to four people, yielding them 125,000 private points each. On the other hand, Satou-san, Hondou-kun, and Miyamoto-kun were all part of the Rat Group. Dividing the reward money by three would yield them at least 166,666 private points each."

"W-Wait... This is unfair! I didn't get anything-!" cried Ike.

Before Horikita or Hirata could respond to him, Karuizawa immediately interrupted him.

"Don't even start spouting your bullcrap, Ike-kun," she said.

"Shut up, Karuizawa. You're just opening your mouth because you got some money. That goes for everyone who isn't talking right

now, just going with the flow. If most of the class didn't get any money, I'm sure they'd be rallying behind me."

Ike glanced at the silent Yamauchi, Hondou, and Miyamoto, giving them a disgusted and disappointed look.

"And look at how the Rabbit Group's rewards are divided. That shit ain't equal at all! Why are you getting 200,000 private points while Professor and Yukimura are getting 150,000?!" Ike instantly countered her with a logical argument.

The class started murmuring amongst each other. Surely, it was strange that Karuizawa was getting 50,000 more private points compared to her groupmates.

"Huh? The equal distribution of the points was done by default. No one said that it would be the ironclad rule. And besides, why would you even care about the matters within *our* group? Horikita-san wouldn't even put this detail in if Yukimura-kun and Sotomura-kun didn't agree with it." Karuizawa shook her head in dismay and muttered softly. "Is this guy an idiot?"

"Seriously? Yukimura, Professor, are you guys seriously letting her have the bigger slice of the pie?" He turned to them in disbelief.

"As much as I dislike Karuizawa's attitude, I didn't really have a problem with it. It's not like I'm running low on points," replied Yukimura.

"Of course, I will not reject the notion of getting more private points, but Karuizawa-dono was the VIP of our group, anyway..." followed Professor.

"The Rabbit Group achieving Outcome #3 was part of Horikita's plan with Class C. In exchange for giving up our VIP's name, Class C would hand over the private point rewards back to us. Technically, Karuizawa didn't even have the responsibility to share her points with us, unlike the other groups where Horikita was the one who figured out the VIPs from an enemy class," explained Yukimura. "Objectively speaking, Karuizawa was already being extremely generous to let us even have as much as 150,000 private points when she could've kept them all to herself."

The vibe of the murmurs started shifting against Ike instead. Due to his unawareness of what actually happened behind the scenes, he made a hasty judgment and accused Karuizawa's character.

"Hmph..." Luckily, she didn't even need to defend herself.

"Well, Karuizawa probably ain't the right person to shut you up since she's getting some money. Take it from someone who won't get anything instead. We're from the same group, after all." Ken chimed in to reprimand Ike. "If I'm being honest here, Horikita could just take all the private points and no one would even have the right to complain."

"Sudou's right. She was the one who figured out the pattern, after all. The fact that she and Hirata even bothered arranging this meeting to let everyone know about how they did things was already enough to make me satisfied even though I wouldn't receive any private points by the end of it." Kikuchi joined him seamlessly.

"Listen here, all of ya. 'Part from Horikita, Hirata, Kushida, Kiyotaka, and some other involved people who worked behind the scenes, none of us did shit. So all of you should just listen to them with your mouths shut. Be thankful if you're lucky enough to get some points." Ken finished giving his piece with a huff.

The contempt seen in the eyes of our classmates doused Ike's petty rage. He sat back down with an apologetic yet understandably bitter expression.

"Kanji-kun, please calm down." Kikyou pleaded with a concerned look.

"Kikyou-chan is right, Kanji. We can even share some of our points with you," said Hondou.

His friends followed suit in trying to defuse the situation.

"Sorry..." he muttered. "Damn it, man. I looked like an idiot again."

To be honest, I couldn't even blame Ike's sole loss on this one. If the likes of Yamauchi, Hondou, or Miyamoto didn't get any points, I'm sure they'd complain just as much as Ike, if not louder. As I've discussed with some people before, the main flaws of most students assigned in Class D were their shortsightedness and immaturity. These four along with some other students in our class still have these flaws in particular-- a stark contrast to what could be observed from Ichinose's monolithic class or Katsuragi's orderly class. These unwanted qualities wouldn't just disappear because we're now in Class A.

Horikita, who silently let everything play out, finally spoke.

"Are you done?" Everyone stopped making noises after hearing her cold tone. "Good, allow me to explain further then. There's actually a way to make everyone receive points. The rewards have a grand total of 7,000,000 private points, excluding Kouenji-kun's share, of course. If we divide that by 39, then everyone will receive points."

That's certainly a valid idea. I'm sure some of our classmates have thought of it already.

"Why didn't you do it, then?" Yamauchi asked right after putting his phone away. "That would make everyone happy, right? I think it's a good idea."

A quick calculation would yield around 179,487 points. Yamauchi probably used his phone calculator to know this, and

since he'd gain 54,486 more points from what he'd initially have, he went behind the idea, pitching it with boldness.

"Why? Let me ask you this then, Yamauchi-kun. Do you think you deserve it?" Horikita asked coldly.

"That's... Well..."

"Look at Matsushita-san, for example. She played a big role in the initial and final parts of the exam. But because she's a member of the Cow Group, she wouldn't even gain a single private point. If anyone should complain about not getting anything, it should be her."

Everyone looked at Matsushita, making her blush.

"I-I'm alright, really. I'm not running low on points, anyway," she said.

"If anyone of you has a problem with how we decided to distribute the points, feel free to speak. We're all here to debate anything. If presented with a valid argument, Hirata-kun and I are willing to comply." Horikita glanced towards Ike and Yamauchi before facing everyone in silence.

"I don't think anyone would be willing to run their mouths now. They'd just look pathetic like Ike and Yamauchi." Karuizawa scoffed with a smirk.

"Hey, why was I included?" Yamauchi protested.

"Hah?!" The fed-up Karuizawa turned to Horikita. "Say, Horikita-san. How much would each of us get if you divide the 7,000,000 private points by 39?"

"179,487," she replied.

"See? You just opened your mouth to help suggest that idea because you'd gain a lot more than your supposed 125,000. Try being more subtle next time before hiding your ulterior motives. Frankly speaking, if anyone deserves to gain 0 points in this class, it should be you."

Karuizawa's tongue was the sharpest when she wanted it to be. She basically murdered Yamauchi in front of the class.

"W-What the hell?! Who are you to even say that?! Stop talking out of spite before singling me out!"

Of course, Yamauchi chose to dig himself a deeper grave.

"Out of spite, huh? You're the number one pervert in the class alongside Ike-kun. You're always dragging down the class average for every written exam. Sure, Sudou-kun or Sakura-san might score even lower than you guys, but that won't last long given their attitude towards studying unlike you. You and Ike-kun even got yourself in trouble back in July."

"It was that bastard Ryuuen's-"

"It was *your* fault, no matter how you look at it. You were idiots

who easily believed liars, that's why he targeted you in the first place. If it weren't for Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun's help, the two of you might've been suspended for who knows how long."

Ike gasped alongside Yamauchi after hearing their past mistakes recited to the whole class.

"Back at the island, you wouldn't even move unless you were told to. Ike-kun managed to help the class largely, but what about you? Oh, I remember. You were busy harassing the likes of Hasebe-san and Sakura-san with your perverted stares."

"Wha-?!"

"You think I wouldn't notice? Tch, you're *really* disgusting."

The other students, especially the girls, started looking at Yamauchi with the same revolted eyes. Haruka and Airi also felt extremely uncomfortable after the issue came to light.

"Sorry for mentioning your names, but this guy would probably insist that I'm saying things out of spite again if I didn't." Karuizawa apologized to Haruka and Airi as she justified her words.

"This bastard..." Ken grumbled while glaring at Yamauchi.

Yamauchi grew restless after becoming the center of such negative attention.

"That's not true! I'm not-" His words were cut short after seeing that no one would probably believe him. Despair could be seen in Yamauchi's eyes.

"If I was lying, Hasebe-san or Sakura-san would've defended you already." Karuizawa sighed, reaching the denouement of her long piece. "All of that and you still had the gall to demand more rewards for doing absolutely nothing in the Zodiac Exam...?"

Karuizawa looked at Horikita.

"Hey, Horikita-san. Sorry for taking so much of our time here, but I need to say one last thing." She apologized before continuing. "We're already Class A. I'm not saying that I'm a model student or anything like that. I suck at academics and I'm not exceptionally athletic. I'm sure that goes for a bunch of us in here... But at least, I'm not some excess baggage that enjoys being carried up by others. All three classes will start coming after us soon. Perverts and lazy freeloaders don't have a place in this class, let alone this school. Sorry for being harsh Yamauchi-kun, but I'm sure the majority of us share the same sentiment. I won't call out any more names, but for the students who're as incompetent and immature as you, please get a grip."

Ending in such a manner, Karuizawa seamlessly solidified her position as one of the leaders while shoving Yamauchi's reputation down to the very bottom of the social hierarchy. He couldn't do anything but look down while grinding his teeth, with tears forming

around his eyes. Ike equally had it bad considering his initial outburst of having zero profit. Meanwhile, the likes of Hondou, Miyamoto, and Onizuka wore nervous expressions.

"Thank you for sharing your thoughts, Karuizawa-san. As the current representative of the class, I would like to agree with your disposition." Horikita nodded prior to addressing the class. "With all that's said and done, I hope you could keep Karuizawa-san's words into mind. This school is all about merits. Please remember that we haven't proven ourselves worthy of Class A just yet."

The heaviness in the atmosphere slowly started to dissipate, but Horikita's initial momentum didn't fade. She proceeded with the specifics of our initial objective.

"Now then, if you can remember during our briefing before the Zodiac Exam, the recipients from each group were allowed to procure a temporary ID. I've already talked to our class's recipients and have gotten their signatures."

Horikita sent another image to our class group chat. A formal letter requesting the use of one temporary ID to store 5,500,000 private points could be read. Below that was the signature of every student who was supposed to receive a reward.

Their printed names could also be seen behind their handwritten signatures and reward value.

- *Kushida, Kikyou* - 1,000,000 pr
- *Satou, Maya* - 500,000 pr
- *Horikita, Suzune* - 500,000 pr
- *Yokoyama, Misaki* - 500,000 pr
- *Rino, Akari* - 500,000 pr
- *Wang, Mei-yu* - 500,000 pr
- *Ayanokouji, Kiyotaka* - 500,000 pr
- *Ijuuin, Wataru* - 500,000 pr
- *Hirata, Yousuke* - 500,000 pr
- *Makida, Susumu* - 500,000 pr

These were the members of the Dragon and Dog Groups, alongside the representatives that Horikita chose for triggering Outcome #3 in the Rat, Rooster, and Pig Groups.

"Hirata-kun and I will be overseeing all the transactions to ensure that everyone receives their points rightfully. If anyone of you is against this method, please feel free to raise your hand and present a better alternative." Horikita scanned the class seeing no signs of response. "If no one disagrees, then it's settled. Thank you for coming all the way here to discuss this with us. You may all go now."

The sound of chairs could immediately be heard as soon as Horikita finished her words. Some of the girls approached her with

enthusiastic smiles. The class instantly got divided into cliques and groups before heading out of the classroom.

"Kiyopon, wanna hang out with us?"

Of course, I was also a member of one group.

I approached the four of them with my usual expression, but I was probably smiling in my mind. I don't know what the future would entail, but it seems like the class is in good hands right now.

Author's Notes:

- Nishimura Ryuuko tentative illust. by **8103x** (on Twitter).

- Class B (now A) received 6,000,000 private points by the end of the Zodiac Exam. Kouenji will get his 500,000 independently leaving 5,500,000 for the class. An additional 1,500,000 private points will be received from their deal with Ichinose's class. The grand total will be 7,500,000 private points.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 6.1 - The Value of Things

I stared at my phone and saw "298,139 pr" displayed on the screen. I'm not that much of a spender, but I don't really try to save my private points unless I have a clear purpose for doing so. I started to wonder how the others were doing with their financial situation.

I exited the application and looked through my contacts. I called for someone who more or less knows everything about it. He instantly picked up the moment it rang.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Hey, how's that going?"

"Ahh, did you call to ask about the current state of our financial affairs?"

"Yep, I'm curious about your progress."

"Well, don't worry. Professor and I have been religiously keeping track of everything. We've even calculated the theoretical value for the month of September. Of course, we've included the rewards for the Zodiac Exam."

"As expected of you. So, how much do we have in store?"

"2,600,000 private points."

"No one skipped out on their monthly quotas then."

"Yes, and after the meeting yesterday, I decided to consult every single one of our 'investors' about their supposed contributions. They've all agreed upon a certain consensus."

"How much would we have after including the rewards?"

"4,220,000 private points. Because of our increase in class points, I've also suggested raising the monthly investment by 10,000."

"Did they all agree?"

"Fortunately, yes."

"Then, in September..."

"4,870,000 private points, at best." I could hear him snort proudly.

"That said, Ayanokouji-kun... Wouldn't you consider asking at least some of the girls to keep their money with us, too?"

"Not now. The fewer people who know, the more useful this will become in the future."

"I understand."

"Do any of the guys know that this was my idea?"

"Of course not. I'll be taking that detail to the grave, so you don't have to worry."

"I see. That's all I needed to know for now."

"Is that so? Do come by whenever we hold some game sessions. I also have a few new light novel recommendations for you."

"Really? That would be great. I'll be there whenever. Thanks."

"It's no problem."

And that's where we ended the call. Because of our connection as friends, there was no need for covert ideas like deleting our call histories or anything. Any of our calls could just be dismissed as friendly talks about manga or light novels. And of course, a low-key person like him would hardly raise suspicion from anyone inside or outside the class. That's precisely why I chose him for this role.

Now, I just have to think about how I could get him and Horikita to cooperate with each other.

In conjunction with that topic, I decided to read all the remaining volumes that I haven't finished from a couple of series that he and Professor had recommended. I spent the entire day hauled up inside my room.

During the next day, I arrived before Inogashira's door in the morning, around 9 AM. Knowing her, it's safe to say that she's already awake around this time.

Luckily, there were no girls in the hallways of the 12th floor, but before I could ring Inogashira's room doorbell, another boy could be seen approaching in my direction.

"Ah, Ayanokouji?"

"Renbutsu?" It was Renbutsu Kouta, a boy from Ichinose's Class C. "Ahh... You're both from the sewing club, so I guess the two of you would be good friends."

"Yeah, we were in the same group during the Zodiac Exam as well," he replied with a smile. "I didn't know you were close with Kokoro-chan."

They're on a first-name basis, huh? It's surprising based on Inogashira's nature, but Renbutsu is a really friendly guy, so closing the distance with her wouldn't be too hard for him.

"She's one of Kikyou's best friends, so I guess it was natural for us to be good on terms, as well."

At that moment, Renbutsu and I were finally shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her door.

"The two of us had the same idea then. I can't possibly attend her little get-together with the girls, so I came by to give my gift in the morning," he said.

"Yeah, I don't think I have the guts to do that."

Ding Dong

The door opened only a few seconds after I rang the bell.

"Ayanokouji-kun... and Kouta-kun...?" Inogashira opened up for us and immediately blushed in embarrassment and surprise.

She wore a white summer parka paired with a gray t-shirt tucked into her oxford blue knee-length skirt. It was a very refreshing look to her usual clothing style.

"Yo~," waved Renbutsu. "Happy birthday, Kokoro-chan. We're here to give you gifts."

"Happy birthday. Sorry for barging in so early."

"A-Ah, no, no! Please, come in." Inogashira suddenly came to her senses and frantically gave us some reception.

Renbutsu and I sat on the carpeted floor with the comfort of some cushions.

"You could've given me a call, you know? I was really surprised after seeing the two of you outside my door." Inogashira gently served each of us a cup of tea.

I didn't really intend to look around like a little kid in an amusement park, but I was really amazed by Inogashira's room. Her simple yet feminine decorating style was quite comforting. It's quite similar to Airi's room in that regard.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if that was the case, right, Ayanokouji?" Renbutsu nudged me with a grin.

"Yeah." I grabbed the cute paper bag containing my gift. "Here you go, Inogashira. I hope you like it."

"Can I open it?" she asked right after receiving the said gift.

"Sure."

"Oh! A lip balm! Thank you very much for this, Ayanokouji-kun!" Her smile felt warm and genuine, making me think about how glad I am for buying her a gift.

"Ah, here's mine. It's the sewing kit that you've been talking about." Renbutsu gave his own gift with a grin.

"Eh?! Did you seriously get that?!" Inogashira quickly opened Renbutsu's gift-wrapped present and received an elaborately designed sewing toolkit. "I-It really is the real thing... K-K-Kouta-kun... Isn't this super expensive...?"

"I'm not really a spender so I have lots of points to spare..." Renbutsu scratched his head with a bitter smile. "And admittedly... I didn't know what else to get."

After hearing about Renbutsu's reason for buying such an extravagant gift, I thanked Kikyuu in my mind. Her help was really invaluable in choosing a great yet humbly-priced gift.

"Are you sure about giving me something like this...? You can use

it for yourself too, you know?"

"It's fine, really! Unless of course, if you're not happy with it."

"No, no! I'm really, really happy and grateful for this, Kouta-kun... Thank you..." Inogashira gazed at the gift with a warmer yet gentler smile.

Now, this is quite an atmosphere. It seems like they're really good friends.

"Thanks for the tea, Kokoro-chan. We'll be going ahead now. Enjoy your party later!"

"I'm not having a party, okay? We're just going to hang out."

I don't really know enough about the technicalities between hangouts and parties to be able to distinguish them, so I refrained from commenting.

"Have fun," I said, simply.

"Thank you very much, you two... This really means a lot to me."

Inogashira was a precious girl. She didn't have any other sides to her, unlike Kikyou. That's probably why she can never bring herself to say anything bad about her. Seeing Inogashira's grateful smile made my chest feel warm. It's probably what Kikyou and others feel whenever they're with her.

"It's no problem~! We're friends, after all." Renbutsu gave her a thumbs-up.

I nodded, following his thoughts.

When Renbutsu and I left the girls' area, the two of us had some casual talk. I haven't really hung out with anyone from Class C, so it's great to catch up with what they've been up to.

"Kushida-san hung out with Yaegashi and the others a few days ago. I'm sure some of the guys from our class wanna hang out with you, too."

"I see... I still lack the confidence to invite anyone, but I'll be on the lookout for any calls from them." I took this chance to confirm something. "Speaking of which, I noticed that Class C had become friendlier with the students from other classes. I saw Maeda and Abe hanging out with Demura and Rakuyama the other day. Were they always close with each other?"

Maeda and Abe were guys from Ichinose's class. They were usually wary of Ryuen's class given what happened earlier this year, but the fact that they're on friendly terms with Demura and Rakuyama from Class D says something.

"Ahh, them. Well, I think they only became buddies after the Zodiac Exam. That seems to be the case with most people in our class. I also got closer with some guys from Class A-- or rather, Class B."

Of course, I already knew that those guys were involved with each other because of the Zodiac Exam, but I wasn't sure whether they were already friends before that. After validating my hypothesis, it's safe to conclude that Ichinose's plan succeeded, albeit partially.

After returning to my room, I contacted Horikita with regard to the transactions.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Horikita, is it alright if I help with distributing the points to the class?"

"That's sudden. Why did you decide to tell me now?"

"I was actually talking to some of the guys about their money. That's when I got curious about each of our classmate's private point count."

"In other words, a whim?"

"Hmm... Well, yeah, basically." This might inconvenience her or Hirata, so I should at least offer some benefits. "But don't worry. I'll try to give some advice if there's a need for it."

It was a little bit arrogant and self-important, but Horikita should know what I was trying to say.

"Okay, but, how exactly would you like to help?"

"Anything will do, but if the role of the person transferring the money is available, then I'd take that position. That way, I could clearly see how many points each of them has."

"Alright, that's not really a problem. I've been with you enough to know that you probably won't do anything dodgy."

"Thanks for the trust. But keep backup personnel for that position. I might get lazy and decide not to do it."

"Goodness. I don't know what's more impressive-- your curiosity or your laziness? But fine, as long as your whims aren't a detriment," she sighed. *"May I ask why you got curious about everyone's financial situation?"*

"The class meeting got pretty wild last time, remember?"

"All thanks to Karuizawa-san, I guess."

"Well, that got me thinking. We have more than enough monthly allowance to live comfortably, but some are still unsatisfied with what they have. It's not like they still have a need to save up 20 million private points to change classes since we're already Class A."

Of course, we're not guaranteed to keep this position permanently, so they might be thinking about that.

"I see. You wanted to keep an eye on anyone's who's running low on points?"

"Yep, but I have other motives. For example, Ike and his friends

are spenders, so seeing them with only over a hundred thousand points would make sense. It's the same with Professor, who spends a lot of money to upgrade his devices, or Karuizawa's group, who likes to buy things related to fashion," I explained. "But what if it's someone like Kikuchi or Nishimura?"

"Well, they are known to be level-headed individuals with a lot of self-control. If they're running low on points, then their spendings might raise some suspicions."

"Exactly."

Horikita sighed once again.

"You say that you're done helping the class, but if your whims would allow us to investigate things like these, then I'd have no reason to decline."

"Thanks again."

"You're welcome."

Presented with a genuine reason to help, Horikita would obviously comply. And with that, I've successfully managed to set up a bridge of cooperation between *him* and Horikita. Well, that and one other thing.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 7.1 - Mysterious Trouble

It was 6:00 PM on the 26th of August. My phone silently vibrated with strength. This kind of vibration could only be triggered by the school, much like the loud ringtone that they used for extremely important instructions.

I tapped the notification and read the message.

[Due to an emergency repair work, the Water Department will be temporarily disabling all water systems in the school dormitories.

Because of this, the school will be providing enough water supply for the students, giving out 2-5 liters of drinking water in the cafeteria. Please be warned that the cafeteria will be extremely crowded because of this. The convenience stores are also temporarily unavailable due to overlapping maintenance work, but Keyaki Mall would provide free drinking water. However, bottling the water and taking it back to the dormitories is prohibited.

Regarding sanitation, please be reminded that the current water supply inside the water tank would only allow for a single flush in each room.

We sincerely apologize to our dear students for this untimely inconvenience.]

It sounds like the repair work wouldn't finish until early morning. I turned the faucet to confirm said message, and as expected, nothing came out.

Personally, I won't have much trouble with this sudden development. The remaining tea in my fridge should be enough for a single cup. If I save it for dinner, one cup could get me through the day. Speaking of dinner, I just have to make something that doesn't require any water. My only real problem would be the toilet since we can only flush once.

"Alright, let's go with fried rice," I thought.

While I was prepping everything, my phone suddenly rang. This time, it was a call from someone. I washed my hands to answer the call, but the ringing already stopped before I had the chance to do it.

"Horikita?" I reflexively read the name of the caller.

If it was anything important, then it would be rude if I didn't call back. Contrary to my expectations, however, she didn't answer at all. After calling a bunch of times, I decided to give up. It was weird that she didn't answer back given that she was the one who called first.

I simply went back to making my dinner. The rice was all ready and finally added the egg. After that was settled, all I needed to do was put on some finishing touches to it.

Ring

And that's when my phone rang again. I turned off the burner to answer the call, but the ringing already stopped by the time I managed to grab my phone.

As expected, it was Horikita who called me again. This was starting to become a questionable situation. Did she start getting busy right after trying to make a call? Is that why she didn't answer my return calls? That shouldn't be the case given her personality. Horikita was the type of person who calls when she's calm. Even if something happened, ending the call twice in a row and not picking up afterward was strange, to say the least.

"Yeah, right..." I muttered.

I internally scoffed at myself for thinking too deeply into Horikita's calls. Before finishing up my cooking, I decided to send her a message instead.

(18:37) [Hey, looks like you tried calling me twice.]

(18:37) [Did something happen?]

I can see that the message was instantly received, and then it was labeled as read right after. However, after waiting for a bit, it didn't seem like Horikita was planning to give me a reply.

(18:38) [I'm cooking right now, so I might not respond right away.]

(18:38) [Just text me, and I'll get back to you.]

The same thing happened-- Horikita did receive and read the message, but she didn't reply. Seeing this, I decided to go back to making my dinner.

"Hmm..."

I've already finished eating, but I still haven't heard from Horikita. After gulping the last of my barley tea, ominous feelings started welling up inside my chest.

"She couldn't be... She's not really in danger, is she?"

(19:04) [Are you okay?]

I tried to send in another text, but she didn't even receive it this time.

Did she collapse somewhere? That would be really strange-- it's

Horikita we're talking about here. Did she turn her phone off? Did her battery run out?

What other possibilities existed, though? Why did she call me in the first place? That's what I'm quite concerned about. And the fact that she hadn't said anything was also very strange. What's going on?

Let's think about this logically. Horikita might've had some business with me, but was interrupted by something else. Someone-- a teacher or a classmate might've called for her. The teacher theory was quite weak because even if Horikita was the class representative of Class A, we were still on summer vacation. They wouldn't really have to call her, especially around this time. She did have the contact of most of our classmates, so getting interrupted by any of them would make much more sense...

But the point still stands. It's fine if she didn't respond to my calls, but not saying anything even in messages was bizarre. Did she fall asleep and forget to call me back?

"I wouldn't be talking about Horikita if that was the case."

She was a student of intellect and focus. Forgetting something as easy as replying to a message doesn't really fit her image.

"I'm starting to get kind of worried..."

I can't really do much right now, but I was too bothered to just let things be. For the time being, I tried calling Horikita again. I dialed her number repeatedly, and on the fourth try, I finally managed to get an answer.

"Hello?" Horikita didn't seem surprised. If anything, she actually sounded tired.

"Hey, sorry for calling a bunch of times. I was worried since you tried calling me. We're you sleeping?" I asked.

"No, I wasn't. I'm sorry for not replying."

There were no hints of panic in her voice. It didn't seem like any sort of accident happened.

"I'm kind of in the middle of something right now," she continued.

I guess she was just busy, after all. I felt relieved... and then curious-- because that's when I heard a metallic *thunk* over the phone.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Nothing to worry about. Goodbye."

She abruptly ended the call. Well, at least I managed to get in touch with her. If she says that everything was fine, then all I could do was believe her and move on with my life. I decided to forget about this for the time being, even though my main question remained unanswered.

Why did Horikita call me?

Bzzt

It was around 9:00 PM. I was lying on my bed, watching TV when my phone lit up after receiving a new message.

(21:02) *[Are you awake?]*

(21:02) *[I'm awake.]*

(21:02) *[I'd like to talk to you.]*

(21:02) *[Do you have time?]*

It's been roughly two hours since we'd last talked.

(21:02) *[I'll call you.]*

Horikita immediately picked up on the first ring.

"So, what's up?" I started.

"There's something I wanted to ask you." Horikita still sounded tired, and she made a quick pause before speaking again. *"Let's say there was turtle..."*

"Huh?"

My expectations of what she was going to say were completely blown out of the water.

"It's an extremely smart and talented turtle. If I accidentally hit it and flipped it onto its back, that would be terrible, wouldn't you agree? It couldn't right itself under its own steam."

"I suppose... Though in most cases, turtles can extend their necks and use their legs to flip themselves right back. Giant tortoises and sea turtles are the only ones that are unable to do this," I explained.

"..." Horikita fell silent at my unnecessary explanation. *"This would've been easier if you'd just assumed that turtles can't get up on their own and listened to me."*

Yeah, that made sense.

"Alright, my bad. They can't get up on their own. What's wrong?"

"In that situation, what would you do?"

"I'd probably flip the turtle over. It's not that much trouble. I'd help an ordinary turtle, so I'd probably be more inclined to help an extremely smart and talented turtle."

While I didn't have any reason to save the turtle, I didn't have any reason to abandon it either. I thought I might as well extend a helping hand. That's probably what most people would do.

That said, what was Horikita getting at? Is the turtle a metaphor for herself? Was she in any sort of trouble, like the turtle who couldn't get up on its own? Judging from Horikita's tone alone, she didn't seem to be in a panicked state. Her usual calm demeanor probably meant that whatever issue she had wasn't too pressing or troublesome.

"So, what's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong."

"Well, it sure sounds like that's where this is headed."

"I was just talking about a turtle on its back. It has nothing to do with me."

"Okay, then why are we talking about a turtle? Is that your reason for calling me earlier?"

"Yes..." she insisted. *"I just... wanted to talk to you about a turtle that flipped over."*

Alright, this is getting weird.

"This isn't like you-- is what I wanted to say, but asking for help isn't like you either. I'm sure you called earlier because I'm the only one you could talk to at this point. If that's the case, then don't hesitate to tell me what's wrong. I'm willing to help."

Horikita paused for a moment.

"I'm just having a little trouble."

Finally, we're getting somewhere.

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm in my room."

"Okay. You're friends with Mori and Satou, right? Is it something that they can't help you with?"

"No, absolutely not."

So girls won't be able to help, huh...? Ah-!

"Are there bugs in your room? Like a cockroach? What about Hirata then?"

I heard that's she become acquaintances with Okitani and Makida, too. If that was the issue, then I guess I can understand why Horikita didn't want to talk about it. While the dormitories were generally kept clean, a bug infiltrating one's room shouldn't be an impossibility.

"I don't trust him."

What? Why can't you trust Hirata about this? You seriously don't think that he's too kind to kill a cockroach, right?

"Huh...?"

"Don't misunderstand. There are no bugs in my room. That isn't the problem here. I could deal with them myself, anyway."

So that's not it? If bugs weren't the issue, then what is?

"What's the deal then?"

"It's..." I can feel the reluctance in her tone from the other end of the line. *"No, it's fine, after all. I'll take care of it myself."*

"You say that but it's been three hours since you first called. The fact that we're having this conversation means you haven't done anything about it until now. Am I wrong?" I need to shoot down any of her attempts to pull back. She's been struggling for some

time, so I assume that she's tired of dealing with it now.

"Well, I guess... *It's true that I'm just about at my physical limit,*" she sighed. *"Alright, I'll tell you everything."*

Thank god.

I peeled my ears and got ready to listen. But instead of getting my most awaited explanation, Horikita suddenly made a request.

"Could you come to my room?" Horikita sounded embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"Now? It's already past nine," I protested.

"I know that, but... to deal with this, you need to be here." She spoke with the most frustrated tone ever.

"I might get in trouble for going to the girls' floor at this time of the night, you know?"

"Even I can understand that, but we can't do anything if you're not here yourself." Horikita tersely ended the call.

"This is kinda scary, but backing off after convincing her to take my help wouldn't be any better," I muttered.

I grabbed my phone and key card before scampering out of the room. I should hurry as to not keep Horikita waiting.

Author's Notes:

Even in the canon, yes, Kiyotaka really did exude that boyfriend vibe.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 7.2 - Dangers Lurk in Everyday Life

Sneaking around was pathetic, so the choice of just fearlessly walking in like it's nobody's business posed itself as a great option.

No, that's too much, even for me. If only I were as cool as Hirata or Kikuchi, then it wouldn't be too much of a problem.

I waited until I could use the elevator alone, all the way to the 13th floor. After successfully making my way to Horikita's door, I immediately rang the bell. In this situation, Horikita should've been waiting by her door to receive me, but no one answered.

I slowly started to open the door myself, only to find it unlocked.
"Horikita...?"

I've been in her room once, and since Horikita wasn't in the kitchen nor hallway, it meant that she was behind this door-- the door to her bedroom. Looking around, it didn't seem like the place was decorated any more than last time, just like my own room.

"You're alone, right?" As expected, I heard her voice inside the bedroom area.

"You're being way too loud," I said.

"It's okay. Even if someone came in right now, I'd bonk them with my right hand," she replied.

What in the world does that even mean? I cautiously entered Horikita's bedroom for the first time, and my heart raced unnecessarily. She had her back to me, so I couldn't really see her face. At first glance, nothing seemed particularly strange.

"Okay, I'm here. What's the problem?" I asked while staring at her get-up.

Horikita wore a pastel pink, sleeved semi-wrap dress with white hems and mini-ribbons. If I were to give any comments, she looked very cute in that outfit.

"Once you see, you'll understand."

Horikita slowly turned around to face me. Two different emotions instantly took over my body-- confusion and second-hand embarrassment.

"I see. So that's it, huh?"

"That's it, yes."

I stared at her right hand, which was completely stuck inside a

water bottle. It was unbecoming of Class A's dignified leader.

"Hmm... How do I put this? This isn't like you. Were you playing around?"

"Don't be dumb," she glared.

"This is like when you stick your head between something but can't take it out as a result." Coupled with my silly miming, Horikita's eyebrows furrowed as she swung her arm at me.

"H-Hey, I'm kidding."

"Well, it wasn't funny."

"That's because you're the one getting teased."

"Are you going to help me, or not?" Horikita pulled her arm back, ready to launch a strike against me.

"Okay, okay, chill." I want to etch this adorable image of Horikita in my mind. "How did this happen, anyway?"

"I was trying to wash my hand."

"You could've transferred the water in a bowl and washed your hand there. That's what I did with the last of my water supply, at least."

"I've obviously thought of that, but my sink was already clean and I didn't want to wait until tomorrow to wash the bowl itself. I never thought this would happen as result." Horikita sighed in frustration. "This night is quite filled with misfortune."

Based on the plastic waste that I noticed inside her kitchen trash can, she probably had some take-out for dinner. That way, she wouldn't have to use any kitchenware. It certainly fits her personality to get bothered by unwashed dishes. And I guess sticking her hands inside the bottle itself would be the absolute best way to wash without wasting water.

Meanwhile, the mess in my sink was already set in stone the moment I decided to cook some fried rice. An extra bowl to wash wouldn't really matter. That's how I unknowingly avoided this disaster.

"I see. That doesn't look too comfortable." I grabbed Horikita's right hand-- well, not her right hand, but the water bottle. "Alright, let's get this over with."

Seeing me act, Horikita pulled in the opposite direction. However, she'd been struggling with this for hours. Due to her exhaustion, her entire framework was dragged towards me instead.

Thud

I reflexively held Horikita's body as her face got buried in my chest.

"You should put a little more strength into it. You're going to stay stuck, you know?" I said.

"I know that. I'm just a little bit tired." Horikita slowly pulled

herself away from my embrace. "I'll pull harder and stay firm."

After I nodded, the two of us tried the same thing once more. Horikita pulled her hand as I tried to take the bottle away. She endured the pain which showed in her face, but in the end, she remained stuck.

"Doing it like this doesn't seem to be working. You're just getting hurt."

"I suppose..." Horikita appeared to have resigned herself to being trapped.

"There's no other option. We have to use soap and water to get your hand out of there."

"I have soap, but the last of my water ran out a while ago."

That's right. According to the additional details from the announcement, the outage will end around 12:00 AM *at best*. And even then, that's still almost three hours from now. With the both of us running out of water, the only option left was the supply from the toilet, but Horikita probably wouldn't like that.

"I'll head to the cafeteria, alright?"

Hearing my gentle tone, Horikita nodded her head in embarrassment. Her facial expression looked apologetic.

"Mn... Sorry about this," she said.

Horikita would definitely have a lot of suitors if her cuteness was always showcased like this. I sneakily went out of her room with that thought in mind. We might've been low on options, but some supply of water was all we needed.

"I'm very sorry. So many students came earlier and now we're all out," said the cafeteria lady.

With dinner time being the critical moment for all of us, the supply of water ran out like a trendy accessory. However, I couldn't give up just yet. I didn't really need a lot. About two drinking glasses' worth would be enough to free someone's hand from a bottle.

"Ahh, Ayanokouji-dono."

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun."

I met two familiar faces as I made my way there. It was Professor and Ijuuin.

"Hey, you two. 'Also ran out of water?"

"That is the case, unfortunately," sighed Professor.

"And it doesn't seem like our misfortune ends there," Ijuuin spoke as he looked at the vending machine.

All the water, tea, and juice were sold out. Not a single product was left for us to get.

"I've never seen a completely sold-out vending machine before," I muttered.

"Indeed. It's something you'd see from myths and legends." Instead of having an exasperated expression, Professor nodded in amusement. "Well then, we'll be on our way to Keyaki Mall. We wouldn't want to borrow water from the likes of Kanji-dono or Haruki-dono."

Despite being who he is, Professor still had some hygienic standards. Even if I wasn't close with those two, I could still notice their lack of care for leaving uncovered water or tea.

Ijuuin just nodded at me with a smile. I wonder if he shared the same sentiment?

"Hey Professor," I called. "Speaking of Ike..."

Of course, he instantly knew what I meant.

"Ahh, you're talking about Project Delta, right? Well, thanks to that whole fiasco during the class meeting, he ceased any form of contact with me about that plan. I'd already finished my part, but he has yet to take the blueprint and the device," he answered.

"I see... That's a relief."

"Yes, indeed. Thinking about it in hindsight, I would probably still get apprehended because of my involvement. I don't really trust Kanji-dono or any of his potential accomplices in terms of keeping their mouths shut. If they get captured by the authorities, there's a high chance of them ratting me out as the technician."

"That's true. It's better to call that plan off for your own safety."

"I mean, after Karuizawa-san burned those two alive, especially Haruki-kun, I doubt any of them would still have the guts to go through with that plan," commented Ijuuin. "However, I don't think their current behavior is set in stone. Even after getting targeted by Ryuuen-kun, didn't they regress back to their original selves after a while? Who's to say that it won't happen again?"

"And unfortunately, those two, along with Soshi-dono and Ryoutarou-dono, had practically become a circle-jerk. Objectively looking at it from my all-seeing eye, they've been influencing each other for the worse," added Professor.

"I thought those two acted as Ike and Yamauchi's voices of reason?" I asked.

"Well, that's how it was before, but wretched fate made the opposite happen. Kanji-dono and Haruki-dono became their voices of *chaos* instead." Professor's anime-like delivery didn't make that terrible news any better.

But of course, it's not like I haven't noticed it already. It was really unfortunate given how cooperative Hondou and Miyamoto were back when we tried to save Ike and Yamauchi from trouble. I guess high school boys will be high school boys.

"I'm glad you two aren't following their footsteps," I said.

"That would be quite an insult, Ayanokouji-dono. They're too obsessed with 3D girls that they probably wouldn't even have the chance to get close with. It's better to accept reality and love 2D girls, instead. Isn't that right, Wataru-dono?"

"Mn, I agree. It's less troublesome and less hurtful. Even if you're the embodiment of male popularity in our class, I'm sure you can still relate in some way, Ayanokouji-kun. You've been heavily learning our culture since the start of school, after all."

With the amount of otaku media that I've consumed in the past five months, Ijuuin's words were more than correct. I've delved into anime, manga, games, and even visual novels, but the most I've consumed would be light novels. It probably stemmed from my nature as a bookworm back then-- if I could even be considered one.

"You're probably right," I shrugged. "Well then, I'll be going on ahead. I've finished all of your recommendations, so I'll be dropping by to borrow some more next time."

"Why of course. With the amount of knowledge you hold, you're finally ready to play my most treasured masterpiece."

It's probably another ero-visual novel, but given Professor's evaluation, the other aspects should be top-tier.

"See you, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll give you some manga recommendations next time," waved Ijuuin.

I was really thankful for having those two as my friends. It was often depicted in works of fiction that popular males were loathed by otaku like them, but that couldn't be further from the truth. They would become bitter from time to time, but it never reached the scale of envy and hate that guys like Yamauchi or Ike would feel for someone like me or Hirata.

In fact, it was actually the opposite. Consuming a lot of those narrative media made Professor and Ijuuin open-minded individuals. It would be wonderful if they could influence Ike and the rest. However, after hearing about their current states, it should be nothing but a pipe dream at this point.

"It seems like you're empty-handed."

Horikita, the bottle-armed woman, stared at me.

"And it seems like your hands are still full," I joked.

Horikita instantly swung her blunt weapon at me.

"H-Hey, it's a joke!"

"It was also extremely unnecessary, uncalled for, and of course, unfunny." Horikita sighed before speaking in a renounced and self-

deprecating tone. "So, what are we going to do now?"

"We don't have any choice. We could only ask for someone else's water. We could head to Keyaki Mall, but that should be our last resort. It's the most troublesome solution, especially for you."

"I'll *never* get out of my room in this state... Well, unless there's no other choice." Horikita averted her gaze to the side. "Really, this night is filled with misfortune."

"I could agree with you on that..." I sighed. "But we have the entire class to contact, you know? I'm sure they'd be glad to help."

"No," Horikita's tone immediately turned deep. "I *refuse* to let them know about my situation."

"Alright, I understand. I'll just lie and say it's for me."

If push comes to shove, we might even need to contact emergency services.

"For now, let's try getting in touch with Hirata. He's the most reliable person we could ask at this point."

"If you tell him that you're the one who needs it for appearance's sake, then that's fine. I dislike the idea of owing him a debt." Horikita averted her eyes with a conflicted look.

That's fair. As a fellow leader, she's treating Hirata like a business partner. It's a common mindset to want to stay on equal ground at all times. But no matter how dissatisfied she was, we can't really do anything else at this point, unless she was willing to take the risk of going out.

I tried calling Hirata, but no matter how many times the phone rang, no one answered. Even when I tried sending him a message, it still went unread.

"He's not responding at all. Maybe he's asleep."

"I'll take that as both good news and bad news," she replied.

"Should I ask Kikyuu then?"

"You're joking, right?"

"She'll gladly help you out, though. Or are you still on bad terms with each other?"

"We're not on bad terms, but there's no reason for us to get along either. Could you please ask another person?"

"I guess that's fine, too. I'll try asking my friends for now."

"Thanks," she sighed, seemingly fed up with the state of her right hand.

Well, I want to hurry up and return to my room, too. I checked in on the Ayanokouji Group's group chat but it didn't seem active at the moment. I hope at least one of them can give us some.

(21:26) [Hey, do any of you have some extra water? I need some right now, but I ran out a while ago. The cafeteria's all out, as well.]

Not even 20 seconds passed before a reply came in.

(21:26) *[I have some!]*

(21:26) *[Haruka has some.]*

Haruka and Akito sent their replies at the exact same time.

(21:26) *[Ohh, can I have some?]*

(21:26) *[Around half a liter will do.]*

(21:26) *[Of course! You can come to my room and get it.]*

(21:26) *[Bring your container, okay~!]*

(21:27) *[Thanks a lot.]*

(21:27) *[No problem!]*

(21:27) *[I'll be waiting.]*

"Sweet. Haruka's willing to give me some. I'll be right back, okay?"

"Alright, please be careful."

I got out of the room and walked my way towards the elevator. Thankfully, I made it to my room without any issues and I managed to get my own water bottle.

"Kiyotaka-kun?"

As I got to the tenth floor, a familiar girl entered the elevator.

"Kikyou?"

"Hey, what are you doing here around this time?" she asked innocently.

It didn't really seem like she was trying to tease me given that we're the only ones in here. So, I decided to answer her question honestly.

"I'm on my way to Haruka's room. I'm trying to get some drinking water since the cafeteria ran out," I replied, showing her the empty bottle in my hand.

Well, it was a half-truth given that it's not really for me, and it won't be used for drinking either.

"Oh, I thought so! You see, I'm on my way to Maezono-san's room to bring her some water," she smiled. "Really, what a pain in the ass."

Her angelic expression didn't match her last sentence, but I guess that's just Kikyou being herself. Maezono wasn't really part of her main group, so it makes sense that she harbors some unpleasant feelings underneath her kind actions.

The two of us got off on the 13th floor, but given our destinations, that's also where we decided to separate.

"I'll be going on ahead now. Good night~!"

"Yeah, good night."

I watched her walk away before briefly turning around. When I

arrived in front of Haruka's room, the door opened even before I could ring the bell.

"Ah, Kiyopon, you're here~!" she greeted.

She wore a beige-colored cardigan paired with a light-yellow t-shirt peeking from her chest area. She was also wearing black stockings underneath her silky-white pleated skirt. I felt her AC on full blast so this get-up was quite reasonable.

"Hey," I raised my free hand to say hi.

"I was about to go take a peek outside since I thought you got lost. I'm glad that it wasn't the case." Well, I guess I did take some time getting here-- a little bit more than one would initially expect.

"My bad if I kept you waiting."

"Pfft, what are you saying? It's all good." Haruka merrily walked back inside. "C'mon in."

Her room wasn't as decorated as Kikyuu's room, but not as simple as Horikita's room either. It's the kind of self-serving room that rarely receives any visitors, but can be considered presentable even if a group of guests came in. Of course, being on the same floor as Horikita's room meant that they had the same general layout.

"Alright, give me your bottle. I'll fill it up for you." Coincidentally, the bottle I had could hold around 500 milliliters worth of drinking water. "Here ya go~."

"Thanks a lot. You really saved me."

"Don't worry about it. Miyacchi got some from me, too. And I wouldn't be surprised if even Kencchin comes running here, as well."

"Alright, I'll be going ahead. I owe you one."

"Sure! And you seem to be in a rush. Don't get in an accident and drop all that water, okay?"

"Don't jinx it. I'm getting nervous now."

Fortunately, Haruka's joke became my way out to avoid her initial comment. She giggled as I exited her room.

After confirming that the hallway was empty, I hastily entered Horikita's room. I opened the door to her bedroom only to see her half-asleep. She immediately tried to sit straight as soon as I got in.

"You're back."

"Yeah, and you didn't even notice me. You must be really tired."

Horikita looked as sharp as ever now that I'm here, but she looked a bit wobbly earlier.

"I guess so," she replied.

"What if someone got in and saw you in this state?" I teased.

"Stop thinking about worthless things. Now that you've got some water, let's just get this over with."

I know that more than anyone, but I can't help but want to tease

her more.

"Well, since you'd probably take extra steps in order to not get stuck like this anymore, why don't we take a commemorative photo-?"

Horikita's glared at me and raised her hand. She seems fixated on bonking me because of that joke. However, she's the type of person who'd never do feints, so I easily caught her strike. I suddenly pulled hard, and the combination of Horikita's surprise and exhaustion resulted in her getting helplessly dragged close to me.

Click

"How dare you..."

"You look really exasperated here. It's not my place to tell you this, but you should smile more." I showed her the photo with a smug expression.

Of course, I deleted the photo right in front of Horikita's eyes. Her anger noticeably faded into a pout.

"At least you're aware of it. I don't want to hear that from *you*, of all people." She shook her head, looking completely done with this entire situation.

Horikita took the water and entered her restroom. After a few minutes, she came out with both water bottles in hand. This time, her right hand was holding on to her water bottle instead of getting held by it.

"There's still some water left." Horikita returned my bottle back without an issue.

"Oh, thanks."

She looked at me with firm eyes before speaking.

"Thank you very much, Ayanokouji-kun. You really saved me this time."

The fact that I didn't have to urge her to say thank you emphasized her growth. I was a little bit surprised-- and happy.

"It's no problem."

We could've dealt with the issue way earlier if she weren't so uptight about telling me. I'm sure Horikita was aware of that, as well. But at the same time, I also get it. It's not like her to show weakness to anyone, and that's probably the reason why she came to me for help.

Horikita didn't like the idea of asking for help in general. Luckily, I passed through that barrier and became an exception. Horikita doesn't see me as someone she needs to lead, so the idea of making me see her vulnerable side wasn't as revolting. And it's not like this was the first time I've seen her vulnerable. Things probably started changing between us after I got involved in her sibling squabble.

Before I could enter my room, I suddenly noticed how light my pockets were...

"I forgot my phone..."

I scampered back to the elevator with an annoyed groan. My ride briefly came to a halt when the gate opened after reaching the 5th floor.

Of all the people I could ride this small elevator with...

Kouenji Rokusuke, a fellow classmate, waltzed inside without a care in the world.

"Elevator boy, top floor."

Are you for real? Well, he doesn't even seem to recognize me given how focused he is on his mirror. I quietly pressed the button and my journey back to Horikita's room finally continued.

"This night really was filled with misfortune..." I thought.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 8.1 - Are They Temporary?

I just spent the whole time gaming and reading with my friends yesterday. Ijuuin's room was a sacred haven of consumable content. Of course, Professor also had a hand in funding their entertainment. The books, CDs, and games were bought by Ijuuin while the consoles and devices were bought by Professor. As for me, I'm proud to say that I receive special treatment from the two of them. "How?" you ask?

Well you see, private points don't grow from trees. Despite the surplus in our allowance, they vowed to never go broke. That's where their "*business*" comes in. Manga, light novels, game consoles, etc-- everything was bought by the two of them. So, they gave everyone who was willing to pay the option to "*borrow*" their merchandise for a considerably lower price. The customers were also forced to handle everything with care. One small scratch equals buying the whole thing. If the damage was internal, Professor would confirm as to who was at fault. Of course, every purchase was backed by a solid contract with detailed conditions, so no one would argue with them for the sake of cheating the business.

You might've guessed where this is going by now. Being an exception, I was allowed to borrow everything for free. We liked hanging out with each other, and since I never really took advantage of their kindness, I maintained a very friendly relationship with them. Of course, only the three of us knew about this. On the surface, Ike and Yamauchi were probably closer friends with them, but even they had to pay. If the truth comes out, it would cause some headaches.

Bzzt

While reminiscing about the fun I had yesterday, a notification suddenly came in.

"How timely... Well, my arrival *was* pretty timely." I muttered, taking my drenched shirt off.

After my daily jog, I entered my room at exactly 6:00 AM. That's when I received a message from my friend and classmate, Horikita Suzune.

The content of her message? Well, she didn't even say anything.

It's just a phone number. That's it. She's telling me to contact whoever this person is, I assume.

"Oh, finally, some context," I muttered after seeing another text come in.

(6:01) [ASAP.]

She sent four capital letters from the English Alphabet telling me to hurry up.

Uh, okay...? I think that's enough context...? Well, for now, I guess I'll give this person a call.

"Woah-!" I reflexively muttered as soon as the other end picked up. My call was answered very fast which would make sense if the receiver was waiting for it.

"Is this Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?"

I frowned after easily recognizing his voice. It was none other than Horikita Manabu-- Horikita Suzune's older brother, my senior, and the Student Council President.

"Oh... It's you..."

"I didn't expect you to call me this early."

"You didn't expect my call, but you picked up instantly?"

"I'm always on standby for any calls, even on summer vacation," he replied.

"Okay...? By the way, did you need something from me?"

"Yes, that is indeed that case. I didn't want to cause any unnecessary disturbances so I asked Suzune to give you my number. That way, you can just call me whenever you're available. Of course, I would've needed you to contact me sometime today," he elaborated. *"No matter. I'm just repeating myself at this point. I already explained everything to Suzune when I gave her my instructions. I wonder if she was able to relay everything to you?"*

"Oh yeah, she did an amazing job with relaying *everything*. It's the reason why I'm calling you right now, no?" My tone was supposed to be sarcastic, but I don't think this guy picked up on it.

That said, Horikita honestly did a phenomenal job. If she gave me the entirety of her brother's instructions, I might've been too lazy to even entertain the idea of contacting him.

"I see. Then I would need you to come to the student council tomorrow. Today is the last day of the renovation, so the place will be functional by that time. I'll work my schedule around your arrival so we can have a lengthy discussion."

"Can't you just tell me everything on the phone? I'd want to avoid a lengthy discussion more than anything."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. The matters that I would like to discuss with you shouldn't be taken lightly." The tone of his voice got heavier.

"What is it, anyway?"

"Let's just say that it involves your desire to have a peaceful high school life. Depending on how things develop, your solace might not last."

At that moment, I finally decided to stop fooling around with my words.

"I see... Alright, you got me. I'll go... Is this afternoon fine? I don't really care about the location."

"Unfortunately, my schedule is packed for today. The school is busy preparing for the interschool sports tournament at the end of the month. Let's continue this conversation tomorrow."

"I understand. I'll be there in the morning."

After hanging up, I immediately showered, changed clothes, and had breakfast. Horikita Manabu's enigmatic words rang inside my head.

"Your solace might not last."

"I know that more than anyone. Thinking about it now, living a peaceful life, in general, was supposed to be nothing but a pipe dream for someone like me..."

But that won't stop me from trying to obtain it, no matter how improbable.

It just barely passed 7 o'clock when I decided to contact Horikita.

"Hello?"

"What was that about?"

"Did you call him?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "He said he wanted to talk to me in person. Do you have any idea about what he wants?"

"No. Nii-san gave me some instructions to have you contact him, but he didn't really give me any details about what he wanted from you, exactly."

"I see... That's too bad. He said I had to wait until tomorrow if I wanted to know," I sighed.

"Hmm... You're usually so dismissive when it comes to him, but you sound awfully fervent about this." Horikita's tone was laced with curiosity.

"I guess so. He said some interesting things that caught my attention."

"What interesting things?"

It's about getting my peaceful life disrupted or something. I could easily tell her the truth, but I didn't. Horikita didn't need to know about any of these given her current position. I'm fairly certain that this would be a personal problem that I should deal with alone.

"Well, maybe I can tell you about it when I'm done talking with your brother."

"I see. So, is that all?"

"Yeah, thanks."

I stayed in bed after ending the call. I also decided to stay inside my room for today. It's not like I made any plans. I'd probably just end up watching anime or reading manga. That said, I'm too lazy to do anything right now.

At that moment, a smirk might've appeared on my face.

"The fact that I could actually afford to get lazy-- what a luxury."

I felt free, I felt alive. And now that Horikita and Hirata hold the positions of class leaders, I was also at peace.

Were these things temporary? In the grand scheme of things, that may be the case. But I can't be wrong in wanting to prolong them as much as I can.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 9.1 - Future Entanglements

August 29th, 9:00 AM.

I lazily knocked on the Student Council Office's door.

"Welcome," Secretary Tachibana greeted me with a stern expression.

The student council room looked a bit different from last time, but the changes didn't feel like an idea that someone like Horikita Manabu would come up with.

"Have a seat." His words interrupted my train of thought.

Well, whatever. It's about time I get to know what he was talking about.

"What did you want to tell me?"

"I wouldn't want to waste your time for coming here, so I'll get straight to the point. Simply put, you should expect that the school would be changing soon, or at least, some of the systems around how things work inside it."

"Soon, huh? The second semester will be starting soon, and around that time will be the election for the new student council president."

"I'm glad we're on the same page," he nodded, fixing glasses.

"Well, your words are making things obvious for me."

"You wanted to avoid a lengthy discussion, so I'm willing to fulfill that request. I just wanted to warn you about the future student council and the changes that they will exact towards the school and its students," he said.

"So you won't give me any more details?"

"Do you want me to?"

Secretary Tachibana silently served us some tea.

"I've got a lot of time to spare. Some information shouldn't hurt," I shrugged.

"Then I should tell you about the student council first," he replied.

"As you know, I am the current president with Tachibana Akane as my secretary. While the other members aren't around right now, you can take a look at this list."

President:

1. *Horikita Manabu (Class 3-A)*

Vice President:

1. Nagumo Miyabi (Class 2-A)
2. ???

Secretary:

1. Tachibana Akane (Class 3-A)

Assistant Secretary:

2. Kiriya Ikuto (Class 2-B)
3. Mizowaki Tooru (Class 2-B)

Treasurer:

1. Ayase Shun (Class 3-A)

General Affairs Manager:

1. Ichinose Honami (Class 1-C)

He gave me a text-only list of the student council members. This is certainly some useful information, but practically unusable if I can't match these names to the right faces.

"If you want to see them or meet them in person, you'll certainly get that chance if you join the student council," he continued.

What a stingy bastard.

"No thanks. I'll try to do something on my own."

"Alright. For now, I'll explain some things about the student council as an organization. Of course, these are all information that any student could acquire. Though unfortunately, only a few are interested in knowing them."

Well, the student council is generally just a group of students that have more work than others. They are still part of the educational system, much like any other after-school club. Unlike what's seen in anime or manga, they don't really hold that much power in real life as an independent organization. They're really not revered as these super students who could do everything. They just need to be competent and diligent kids who are at least decent in academics. However, it doesn't seem to be the case in this school.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School isn't the type of school that would waste such a label to ordinary students. It was evident with how admired Horikita Manabu was in his class. They wouldn't have been able to stay in Class A for three straight years if it weren't for his leadership, and he did so while being the Student Council President.

That said, I'm sure that position held its advantages considering that this school's student council is a lot more powerful than your average ones.

"You've invited me to become a Vice President before, right? The position still seems to be vacant."

"Oh, are you interested?"

"No, I'm not." I dismissed him instantly before making another

comment. "So Ichinose became a member of the student council, huh?"

"The final decision wasn't mine. I initially rejected her applications," he replied.

"Then whose decision was it?" I asked.

"Nagumo Miyabi, the Vice President."

"How does that work?"

"I could've vetoed his decision with my own judgment, but I chose to let Nagumo's injunction be," sighed Horikita.

Ichinose seemed like a worthy member of the student council, though. But that's just my personal opinion.

"Is there anything else that I should know?" After memorizing the names on the list, I gently returned the paper back to his table.

"What do you want to know?"

"Their faces, their personalities, their affiliations, their abilities--all that stuff. Who should I look out for? Why would this be detrimental to my high school life? Those kinds of questions, as well. I'm sure you know that already, but I don't think you'll give such information out for free."

"How sharp. You are right on the mark. But even if you refrain from pushing your inquisitiveness, I'm sure you have your own methods to get them."

What a pain, but it's expected for Kikyuu to be on his radar, as well.

"If you can't give me anything else, then at least answer my main question. Why would the new student council disrupt my peace?" I slowly stood up and prepared to leave.

"Things will change in the future. Those who don't have the abilities will fall, and those with talent will be forced to play." Horikita Manabu answered me with an enigmatic tone.

"So that's the case... I guess I can understand why you're trying to warn me."

Are you worried about your sister? I wanted to ask that question, but I didn't need to implore his feelings about her right now.

"Are you going?"

"Yeah. I'll make sure to return the favor, and I'll be back to negotiate a certain matter in the future."

"I see. Then for now, why don't you give an item back to its owner?" He looked at Secretary Tachibana with a nod.

"Yes," she replied before approaching me with something in hand. "This belongs to Iida Aoi-san of Class 3-A. Please return it to her as you go."

I received a shark-designed keychain. It had golden-colored chains and the shark had... arms? I thought it was pretty cute. Its

design certainly fits her personality.

"Iida-senpai? Did she drop it here or something?" I asked.

"So you know her? Well, no matter. To answer your question-- Since the captain of the volleyball team fell ill, Iida had been the one tending to their matters. She did indeed drop that keychain on our previous temporary office yesterday, but Tachibana and I were too busy to return it," he explained.

"We've already contacted her about this. Since Iida-san has some matters to go through with the faculty, I believe she's already inside the school building." Secretary Tachibana's words were interrupted by the buzzing of her phone. "I just received her reply. She's currently on standby inside Class 3-A's classroom with Konishi-san."

"Alright, I'll go give this back to her."

"Thank you," she nodded.

I gave Horikita Manabu a quick glance and saw him looking through some papers without a care in the world. And with that, I exited the Student Council Office.

It wasn't long before I reached the room labeled "3-A". I grabbed the door's latch and slid it open.

"Ah, it's Ayanokouji-kun~!" Iida-senpai noticed me and raised her voice.

"Good morning to you~." Konishi-senpai followed with a greeting.

I grabbed the keychain from my pocket and tossed it to Iida-senpai as soon as I got near.

"The student council asked me to return this back to you," I said.

"Oh-! Nice throw~!" Iida-senpai swiftly attached the keychain back to her bag. "I knew they sent a first-year student, but I didn't expect it to be you, of all people."

"What a nice coincidence!" commented Konishi-senpai.

If I remember correctly, it's been around ten days since I've last seen them. Iida-senpai's short and dark hair which complemented her sporty and energetic personality was still evident. The same goes for Konishi-senpai's beautiful blond hair along with her gentle yet jolly personality.

This time, however, they were wearing their school uniforms.

"Did you have any business with the student council, Ayanokouji-kun?" Iida-senpai asked.

"Well, the president talked to me about some stuff."

"Did Horikita-kun invite you to become a member of the student council?" This time, Konishi-senpai was the one who asked me a question.

"Huh? No, well, he did but, how could you tell?"

"Just a hunch. You're an honor student like Kikyō-chan, right? It wouldn't be weird for Horikita-kun to want exceptional freshmen on his side."

"I guess so..." I replied, putting my hands inside my pockets. "What about you then, Senpai? I already know that Iida-senpai had some matters regarding the volleyball club."

"Oh, I was already in the building since way earlier. A number of things still needed to be moved from the Tea Ceremony Clubroom to the Student Council Office, and as the president, I was there to overlook the process in some way," Konishi-senpai answered with a smile.

"So that's the case. Well then, I've done what's been asked of me, so it's about time I go now." I turned around and started walking away.

"Bye-bye, Ayanokouji-kun! Thanks for this!"

"See you next time!"

I could only respond with a nod. These two were really carefree. They seem to be enjoying their high school lives to the fullest. At that moment, I remembered Horikita Manabu's words.

"You're not the first person I've associated with that just wants to live a normal high school life in this school. I suppose I can understand where you're coming from."

I wonder if he was talking about them?

Author's Notes:

If the canon releases official information about the structure of the Student Council, the information in CotE: Alter will be adjusted accordingly.

The surnames "Mizowaki" and "Tonokawa" are both canon. Both of them became the Secretaries of President Nagumo.

*- Iida Aoi and Konishi Yua tentative illust. by **ChoBE_2** (on Twitter).*

*- **ChoBE_2-sensei** or **Osabe Tom-sensei** is the illustrator for the light novel series: **"Kurasu de 2-banme ni Kawaii Onnanoko to Tomodachi ni natta"** and I will use the Main Heroines, Asanagi Umi and Amami Yui's appearances as a stand-in for Iida Aoi and Konishi Yua's tentative appearances, respectively.*

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 9.2 - Katsuragi Kouhei is Surprisingly Troubled

"Oiii! Ayanokouji-kun!"

Iida-senpai came running after me as soon as I turned towards the first corner.

"Just because there are no other students doesn't mean you could run and yell in the hallways, you know?"

"Ehehe~. It's fine, isn't it? We're on vacation, anyway." She slapped my shoulder while giggling.

"So, why'd you leave Konishi-senpai alone in that classroom?"

"Oho~? Are you worried about her or something? You can go back and accompany her, you know?"

"That's it. I'm not talking anymore." I faced forward, ignoring her.

"I'm just teasing you!" Iida-senpai laughed heartily. "Yua's going to be fine. She'll meet up with a fellow club member in a bit. Meanwhile, I'm off to handle some matters for the team."

"I heard the team captain was sick."

"Yeah... But she's fine now. I insisted on shouldering her responsibilities until she's back to tip-top shape."

"Well, the tournament will be in two days. It's better to make sure of everything."

I got the information from Ken. He's really excited about it, too.

"Yep! We've also been practicing seriously. Given our team's strength, it's possible to place higher than where we did in the past! Heck, we might even win!" Iida-senpai clenched her fist with a grin.

She's really passionate about her sport, huh? Like Onodera when it comes to swimming or Ken with basketball.

"What's with that stare? You falling for me~? I'm sorry but I don't date younger boys."

Her mischievous smile was really cute so it made me feel nervous. But thanks to my unmoving facial expression, Senpai would never find out.

"No, not really..." Ending my response there meant that I was basically asking to get teased, so I started running my mouth without thinking. "And besides, I think Senpai is the type of person who'd rather date someone that could keep up with her energy."

"Eh...? Ehh?"

She looked really surprised by my words. It wasn't even an exaggeration to say that she was shocked.

"What's with that reaction? I may have said something unnecessary, but it's nothing bad or offensive, right?"

"A-Ah, no, no! It's not that. I just didn't expect you to say something like that all of a sudden. It's the same advice that I got from my friend back in my second year..."

"I don't think it's that hard to figure out. Someone of that type would fit your personality well, right?"

Iida-senpai looked at me like some sort of weird alien.

"Are you actually a playboy, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"What? No... I've never even had a girlfriend before."

What kind of question was that...?

"Ehhh-?!"

"As I said, don't shout in the hallways. Your voice might've reached the teachers' faculty, you know?"

"Wait, wait, wait. Let's break this down for a second." Iida-senpai heavily sighed as if to compose herself. "Firstly, you didn't get affected by my teasing."

That's thanks to my default poker face. Any normal guy would probably get shaken given how cute Iida-senpai was.

"Secondly, you actually gave some practical advice and insights." Her expression finally turned to that of confusion. "And lastly... Contrary to those two previous points, you've actually never been in a relationship before?"

"Yeah...?"

"I got it! You read lots of romance manga, don't you?!" Iida-senpai pointed at me like she just caught a culprit. "Well, either that or you've had lots of friends who've been in relationships before."

Ahh... So that's what this is about.

"You're mostly right on that first part, but while I do read a lot of manga, light novels became my go-to recently."

"Ohh, I thought so! I'm sorry if this sounds rude, but I always thought Ayanokouji-kun was the type of person who didn't have many friends. You've got this gloomy vibe around you," she explained with an apologetic smile.

"It's fine, Senpai. You were right on the money, anyway. While I do have a lot of friends now, that wasn't the case at all before high school."

"I see... So that's why... That doesn't explain why you didn't get nervous when I teased you, though. You must be really used to being around girls~." She stared at me with an audacious grin.

"No, I'm not. I hate to admit it, but I *was* nervous. It's all thanks to my face that I didn't embarrass myself by showing any sort of

creepy reaction."

Senpai found out in the end...

"Ahaha! That makes a lot of sense!" The corner of her lips perked up once again as she faced me. "But you know, you're really fun to talk to. Even after just a few exchanges, I can already tell that you're super smart, even beyond academics. Your middle school classmates missed out on a good friend."

"I was fine with being alone back then. And I don't know about super smart, but when it comes to the stuff I know, I'd have to thank books for that. They're basically the lifeblood of my being."

"Ehehe, even your words are almost identical. My friend said the same thing before. He said that people should read more books because it helped him escape narrow-mindedness."

I personally agree with him. If you read lots of books, you'll be able to see through different types of lenses. Books help shape your worldview without getting it distorted and biased. Unlike real-life experiences where you'd suffer the consequences for being wrong, books are completely safe practice dummies for training your understanding and thinking. It's fine if you make some judgmental errors as long as you recognize your mistake by the time you finish reading. In my case, knowledge and wisdom were probably the reason why I came off as mature even when I wasn't consciously trying to. I'm sure it's the same for most.

That said, things may have changed a lot in modern times. Light literature and the like are much more common nowadays, and consumption of content was easier than ever. Even if a person reads tons of books, properly absorbing what's inside said books is a completely different achievement. For example, someone like Horikita, who reads her books from start to finish with a serious attitude would be better off than someone like Yamauchi, who consumes harem-ecchi manga for horny purposes-- even going so far as to skipping plot-related content at times.

"He must be a really nice person for Iida-senpai to talk about him this highly."

"That's right! He's even cooler than Horikita-kun!" Iida-senpai puffed her healthy chest proudly. "Ah, this is where we part. Thanks for walking with me, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"Senpai," I called out to her before she could run off.

"Hm?"

"That friend of yours... What's his name?"

"Oh... His name is Igarashi Daiki. He was our classmate."

"Igarashi Daiki... 'Was'...?" I knew what her words implied but still tried to act confused.

"Ahaha, I don't know you've seen the current third-year roster, so

I might as well tell you now." Iida-senpai chuckled bitterly before continuing. "As unfortunate as it sounds..."

"He was expelled."

Her melancholic smile was etched into my mind.

"I see... I'm sorry for asking."

"It's fine, it's fine~! It's not something that you should apologize about, really. I'm sure you just got curious. I'll be going then. Bye-bye~!" She waved her hand before scuttling off in another direction.

Given Iida-senpai's evaluation of him, Igarashi Daiki must've been an excellent student... This also meant that his expulsion didn't happen through ordinary means.

Was it a special exam... or something else?

I noticed that it was almost lunchtime. Given my outfit and this scorching heat, it'd be too troublesome to go out somewhere. I could just go home and cook something for lunch, but my supply of ingredients just ran out. I would still need to shop for them which takes away the point of staying out of the blazing sun.

My conclusion? The cafeteria.

"I'm full..."

After enjoying a nice serving of Salisbury steak, I sat there and observed the near-empty school cafeteria.

There were a few students who also ate lunch at around the same time, but they were probably seniors given how I didn't recognize their faces. If I remember correctly, I think Ken was currently practicing in the second gymnasium with his team. I wonder if he brought his own lunch?

"Other people aside, what do I do now...?"

I could just call it a day and go home, but it was still too hot outside. For now, I just got up and cleaned my table as I went. I relaxingly walked around the main building while the food was being digested inside my stomach. To my surprise, it didn't take long until I finally came across someone from the same grade.

"Katsuragi?" I called out to the tall student who was probably on his way to the library.

"Hm?" He turned around and gave me a curious look. "Ayanokouji? What are you doing here?"

"Walking around..."

For someone like him, that was probably the most suspicious

answer I could give. I can't help it though... It's the truth.

"I see..."

"I had some business with the student council this morning. Since it was still too hot outside, I decided to stay in the school building for a while. How about you?"

"Well, I won't tell you that loitering around is bad since even I can feel the intensity of this heat," he replied. "That said, the fact that you managed to make an appointment with the student council is enviable. I have some concerns to relay to them, but I met Ayase-senpai on the way and was told to wait until 2 o'clock. The president is still attending to some other matter, apparently."

Ayase... Shun? The Student Council Treasurer?

"Were you planning to wait around in the library?"

"Ahh, well, not really. I was actually about to head back to the dorms for a bit, but I guess waiting in the library is a better plan."

"I feel like going to the library now that I got the idea. I think I can spend some of my time there and borrow some books." It's nicely air-conditioned, too.

There were only a couple of senior students inside the library, so it was extremely quiet.

"Then, I'll be around here. I'm going to look for some reference books," said Katsuragi.

"Alright, see ya," I replied.

He really was a serious student. I hope some of his diligence was found in my classmates.

Time passed by and it was almost 2 o'clock in the afternoon. I saw Katsuragi stand up after fixing his things. Meanwhile, I finished a few chapters of the book I borrowed.

I thought he'd rush out and head to the student council as soon as he can, but I was approached instead.

"Ayanokouji, you're well-acquainted with the president, are you not?" he asked.

"I wouldn't say well-acquainted..."

"Well, I guess that makes sense. Horikita is the president's little sister, right? It wouldn't be strange for you to be involved with her older brother, especially since both of you are the leaders of Class A."

"It's just her now... and I guess Hirata." I shrugged with a lazy tone.

"So the rumors are true then-- that you're stepping down," Katsuragi commented with a grave tone before facing me once more. "Well, none of those things matter right now. I actually wanted to ask if you could accompany me to the student council. Of course, you can decline if I'm being a bother."

I didn't really have any plans after this. I suppose I can stop by for a bit before going back to the dorms.

"Alright, that's fine. I'm just about finished reading anyway."

The two of us headed to the Student Council Office with Katsuragi taking the lead.

"Pardon the intrusion," he said in a loud, clear voice as he knocked on the door.

"We seem to have visitors. Come in," replied the elder Horikita.

I also bowed slightly to greet them, though Secretary Tachibana looked disgusted.

"I came here today with a request. I heard that student requests go through the student council," began Katsuragi.

"Apparently, you stopped by yesterday and the day before. We were absent because the room was being renovated, and the Tea Ceremony Club's clubroom was being cleaned up. I apologize," explained the elder Horikita.

"Oh no, it's quite alright. It's summer vacation. The fault is mine. However, I'm glad I could meet you today. I was afraid I'd have to go directly to your dormitory to find you," Katsuragi continued.

"The school forbids students to establish contact with anyone on the outside while we're enrolled here. I've come to inquire further into that."

"It sounds as though you've looked through the school regulations. Alright, let's get to your point. Firstly, I would like to clarify that outside contact is not allowed *unless* there is a compelling reason such as severe illness or injury."

"Right. However, I'd like to send a package and message to my family off-campus. Of course, I don't expect a reply," he said.

A one-sided communication, huh?

"Even if communication is one-sided, it's still not permitted," Horikita Manabu replied in a very professional manner.

That's said, Katsuragi wasn't discouraged after a single rejection.

"I heard that the rules about cutting off contact don't apply to packages. Surely, if what is sent doesn't include any text, information, or communication, that wouldn't break the rules, would it?"

"The rule still prohibits it. These restrictions exist for a reason. When the school was founded, the rules weren't quite as strict as they are now," replied the elder Horikita.

Secretary Tachibana continued to elaborate on the reason why.

"It's just as the president says. Originally, shipping a package would've been permitted. However, several students broke their promises. They hid letters in their packages without seeking permission first. Hence, the complete ban of the practice now," she

said.

"And there you have it." The president's closing remark sealed the deal for Katsuragi's request.

However, someone like him wouldn't give up so easily. It didn't seem like he was planning to back down at all.

"I must ask you once again. Please allow me to request direct shipping at the store itself. I will pay for the package to be sent to an address of my choosing, and nothing else. I won't even touch the item. Under those restrictions, there's no way for me to commit fraud."

"But that still violates the rules--"

Katsuragi interrupted Secretary Tachibana with the final part of his argument.

"This school is all about fostering its students' abilities, is it not? I've heard that with enough points, you can do anything. You can buy test scores, or even trade with other students-- those among many other uses. Am I wrong?" he asked.

I haven't confirmed these things with Chabashira-sensei just yet, but if Katsuragi was telling the truth, then saving someone from a failing exam grade was a viable option... as long we could afford to buy test scores.

That's a great piece of news given the dangers that have been lurking around our classmates' recent academic performance. The likes of Ike and Yamauchi, for example, barely passed the final exam back in July. If it weren't for our study sessions, they would've been in great danger.

"That makes things slightly different then." The older Horikita's refuse attitude changed after hearing Katsuragi's trump card. "Before we discuss the expenditure of points, can you tell me whom you'd like to send this to?"

Kikyou and I accidentally bumped into Katsuragi when we were shopping for gifts. It was easy to guess his objective. It was obvious given today's date.

"My twin sister. Since we're orphans, I'm the only one who celebrates her birthday," he replied.

"Then I must make one correction to your theory. The point system is not all-powerful. It's certainly possible to use points to buy test scores or barter with other students, but those things are never explicitly mentioned in the rules. However, the things that *are* explicitly prohibited can't be easily altered even with the help of points. Without the school's permission, it's just impossible," the older Horikita explained.

"How odd. You're basically saying that the rules are filled with loopholes."

"There's nothing odd about what I just said. The school purposefully made rules that allow for loopholes. Didn't you say it yourself? This school is all about fostering its students' abilities. Taking advantage of those loopholes can be considered a skill, but unfortunately, things that were explicitly prohibited aren't part of them."

Katsuragi could only respond with silence. Even for a quick-witted man like him, the experience, knowledge, and resourcefulness of Horikita Manabu were just too much.

"So there's nothing I can do?"

"Correct. If the school rules forbid something, you cannot circumvent them, even with points."

Katsuragi was probably prepared to spend a large sum of points but this looks like the end of the line.

"If you're finished, please leave."

"I understand. Well then, please excuse me."

Katsuragi glanced at me, but I gestured at him, stating that I planned to stay behind. He understood what I tried to express and quietly left the room.

"Do you have some business with us, Ayanokouji?" asked the older Horikita.

"Earlier, you were talking about what happens when a rule violation is exposed, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember an incident that occurred a while ago? Ike Kanji and Yamauchi Haruki from our class were accused of sexually assaulting two Class D girls."

He nodded. Well, he wouldn't necessarily forget that incident with how big of a deal it was and with him being the overseer for the hearing.

"Back then, the case almost went to a trial precisely because the Class D students appealed to the school. Katsuragi, on the other hand, hasn't done anything wrong. He only wanted to ask about something that could potentially break the rules. Only you, Secretary Tachibana, Katsuragi, and I are aware of this. Shouldn't you be able to overlook this particular instance?"

Even if I was trying to choose my words carefully, I'm sure he'd understand what I was getting at. Say you committed a traffic violation; you'd be questioned by a police officer, but you could bribe them to overlook the issue as long as their superiors don't know about it.

"Shipping a package would normally be difficult, but it's probably a simple matter for you."

"I see. You want to resolve everything without involving the

school," he replied.

Someone as upstanding and righteous as Katsuragi probably never thought of *this* loophole.

"That's violating the rules! What a terrible delinquent!" Secretary Tachibana cried in horror, but I did my best to ignore her.

"How did you arrive at this conclusion?" asked the older Horikita.

"Don't you remember the first time we met? I wouldn't forget how merciless you were. That alone proved that you can get away with anything... as long as the school doesn't find out," I answered.

It almost became a full-blown fistfight. President or not, he can't raise a hand against other students.

"You're right on all fronts, but Katsuragi Kouhei missed his chance. I'm sure you don't expect me to say that I'll help him now, though. After all, you didn't bother telling him about this before he left. And even if you did, I will not violate the rules for his sake."

How strict. And dealing with someone as clever as him was a pain. He understood why I didn't warn Katsuragi. In other words, he completely saw through me.

"I understand. I'll be going then."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for some tea?"

"I'm fine with the tea you gave me in the morning, but I don't feel safe not knowing what you might put in it this time."

"W-What a rude first-year!" Secretary Tachibana stammered, but given her stature, it looked pretty adorable.

Horikita Manabu stood up and accompanied me to the door.

"Officially, I didn't meet with Katsuragi today. Even if you act behind the scenes, I won't investigate. Do what you will," he said.

"I don't really feel like doing anything, though."

"I'm simply telling you that I won't get involved."

"Alright, but please make it so that Ayase-senpai is aware of this alibi."

"Ayase?"

"Apparently, he was the one that informed Katsuragi about your meeting earlier this afternoon."

"I see. So that's why your timing was convenient. Alright, I'll take care of his involvement," he nodded before giving me a serious warning. "I believe you wouldn't come up with anything too troublesome but whatever you do, do *not* involve Iida."

"I wouldn't do something like that..."

I got the go-ahead to deceive the school as best as I could. But, Horikita Manabu's gaze cut right through my unbothered facade. He even knew everything that I planned to do. What a shrewd guy.

I finally managed to return to the dorm lobby and saw Katsuragi

sitting there, looking depressed. He noticed my arrival and stood up to face me.

"I'm sorry for involving you in such a strange errand," he said.

"Ah, don't worry. I insisted on tagging along..."

Katsuragi seemed to have given up. He wanted to give his sister a birthday gift, but the school's rules deterred him.

"Here, eat this with your friends. I don't really care about sweets," he said, handing his present over to me.

"Are you sure? Have you given up on the possibility that there might be another way?"

"Is there? The president didn't consent to my suggestions. I think it's hopeless."

"That's because you don't want to break the rules." Katsuragi narrowed his eyes, giving me a suspicious look.

"I won't do anything too risky, especially if my enrolment is at stake."

"I do think you should consider hearing me out. We can head to my room and talk about it at length. We'll also need the help of another person," I explained.

Katsuragi was skeptical, but he had no other options. In the end, I managed to explain everything. Katsuragi was convinced and consented to my plan. Of course, the main player in this little scheme was our other accomplice, Sudou Ken.

Author's Notes:

- Iida Aoi tentative illust. from the light novel series: ***"Kurasu de 2-banme ni Kawaii Onnanoko to Tomodachi ni natta"***.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 9.3 - For Someone's Sake

"So... What am I doin' here, Kiyotaka?"

I sent Ken a text to meet up with me and now he's here. From the looks of his get-up, it seems like he just finished his club activities. Ken gave Katsuragi a dubious stare as soon he entered my room. Of course, the other party was the same.

On another note, asking Ken to come here wasn't the only content of my message.

I explained the whole situation to him before finally letting them hear about my plan.

"So obviously, the plan is to use Ken's tournament as an opportunity to mail this." I handed him the invoice I got from the post office. "Katsuragi, I want you to fill this up with your information. You should also change your ordering preferences and choose the delivery option. It should be fine as long as you're willing to pay the fee."

"That's fine, but wouldn't the school find out about the transaction? Everything will be recorded under my name. We'll both be in trouble."

"Well, not really. That's because you'll only set the delivery on stand-by. As long you don't ask them to deliver the product inside the campus, the school wouldn't know about it."

"How can you be sure?" he asked.

"The school provided us with our own smartphones and SIM cards. Because of that, the communication lines and internet access that are done through them can be tracked down. However, that wouldn't be the case if we don't use any of the WiFi connections inside the campus or use mobile data with the provided SIM cards."

"Why wouldn't the school know about your plan, then? Can you explain how their detection process works?"

"The detection only goes one way-- from the student's device to the school's system. For example, if you request that the store deliver it now, they will always ask for your confirmation via email. Since the destination of the delivery will be outside, the school will be alerted but *only* by *your* confirmation."

"So you're saying that if Sudou confirms the delivery by either using a foreign WiFi connection or a new SIM card, the school will not be alerted?"

Of course, Ken wouldn't be doing it on-site. That's the purpose of the invoice.

"Yeah. The devices of the store employees inside the campus weren't provided by the school, which means they're using their own computers, phones, and SIM cards. And from what I know, they wouldn't detect anything from the store personnel's devices even if they use the school's WiFi connection."

"But Kiyotaka... wouldn't the store just snitch?" asked Ken.

"You don't have to worry about that. When Kikyou and I shopped for some gifts, the store gave us an option to ship things outside, and that meant two things. They left the option open because they weren't informed about the school rules, or they know about the rules, but the school allowed them to leave that option available to catch any rule-breakers. Of course, the store wouldn't have to snitch on any of them since the school can detect the transaction process from the guilty student's device."

"If it's the latter, then the school is a piece of shit," grumbled Ken.

"Well, it is pretty despicable, but I don't think that tops their scheme of keeping the S-System a secret for the first month," I commented.

"That's true..."

"I can more or less understand everything now, but I would like to ask a question about this matter." Katsuragi narrowed his eyes and stared at me. "I doubt Sudou would have the opportunity to buy a new SIM card, so he'd probably use the free WiFi connection from the venue. But even if that was the case, what would you do if the school finds out about it by tracking his device's IP address?"

"That won't be a problem. Even if the school can remotely access our devices via IP address, they wouldn't bother checking anything unless that particular student was already suspicious or being investigated," I explained. "If they tamper with our devices without a proper reason, then they'd be the ones breaking the law."

Silence conquered the room as the three of us digested everything.

"I see... Ayanokouji, I'm sorry for doubting you when you're the one helping me but... How do you know about all of this?" Katsuragi appeared calm, but there was some slight tension in his tone.

"Don't worry, I wouldn't say anything baseless or untrue. I inquired about these exact matters a while back-- for a few personal reasons that I won't talk about. I also cannot mention any of my sources. However, I can guarantee you that everything should work as long as the plan is executed perfectly." I shrugged to make it seem like it wasn't a big deal. "If things go wrong, then you can just

snitch on me as the guy who came up with everything."

Ken put his hand on my shoulder and faced Katsuragi.

"I ain't doubtin' Kiyotaka at all. Since you're doin' this for your sickly sister, then I don't mind helpin'. I know you're prepared to negotiate with us, so let's move on to that. What can ya give us in return?"

"Of course. I've prepared a substantial amount of points to go through with this. Does 100,000 private points sound good to you?"

It was a very high amount. Ken held his chin in contemplation. If I remember correctly, he only has about 90,000 points in his account. After all, he'd *"stored"* a total of 200,000 points in the care of our class's secret banker. I wonder if Ken will also invest the money he'll receive from Katsuragi? And even if he doesn't, it wouldn't hurt to get some extra pocket money.

"Is that your minimum offer?"

"The maximum amount that I can give you is 120,000. Is that okay?" Katsuragi didn't bat an eye as he offered his money. It shows how much he values the success of this plan.

"That ain't too bad. Fine, I'll take it." Ken gladly accepted his terms. If he adds everything up, he'd have around 410,000 private points. There was no reason for him to keep raising the price.

Fortunately, this was Ken's second time playing outside for a tournament as he was able to explain how their schedule goes or how the school investigates their stuff. And although phones were to be confiscated after they enter the bus, it didn't really matter since Katsuragi's phone will be used in the operation.

That said, the school was really strict. Even their bathrooms are separated so they wouldn't have the opportunity to communicate with students from other schools.

"So here's what I need to do: I'll find an opportunity to be alone. Then, I'll use baldy's phone to email the store. I'll send them an image of the invoice 'n receipt, givin' them the go signal to deliver the package. Then, the store would reply by askin' me to confirm the delivery. And then I'll do just that usin' the venue's WiFi so the school wouldn't detect anythin'," Ken narrated. "All is good after that, right?"

"One last question, Sudou. How do you get access to the venue's WiFi without getting in trouble? Is it not protected by a password?"

"Nope. Anyone's free to connect their phones or whatever."

"Hmm, alright. It sounds like a great plan. Both of us will benefit if you succeed, but the opposite is also true if you fail." Katsuragi looked at me with a curious gaze. "You're the one who concocted this plan, Ayanokouji. What do you want for compensation? I doubt you're in need of private points."

We were both from the Dragon Group in the last special exam. By achieving Outcome #1, we had more than enough money to enjoy ourselves for a while. Katsuragi knew that, so he didn't bother offering me any private points.

"Let's just say that you owe me one. A favor from you could be useful in the future."

"Well, I already expected that kind of payment," he sighed.

"It's not just that, you know?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It's today, right? Happy birthday, Katsuragi. Consider this as my gift."

I reached my hand out and gently tapped Katsuragi's arm. He looked momentarily dumbfounded before his face loosened up into a smile.

"Ahh, I see... Thank you."

Ken and I said our goodbyes to Katsuragi. After he left my room, Ken turned to me as if he was waiting for this opportunity.

"So? Why'd you want me to keep the matter with the password a secret? I even lied to him about it," he asked.

In my initial text message, I actually asked if the WiFi in the venue was password-gated. And if the answer was yes, I wanted him to keep it a secret. Of course, Ken was confused at first since he didn't have any context. However, he understood what I meant after explaining everything.

"I didn't want him to know about this." I opened my drawer and grabbed a tiny plastic bag containing a SIM card. "It's a different one compared to what our phones have."

"What...? SIMs like these aren't available for purchase inside the campus, right? Where'd you get this?"

"From someone. It's not that I don't trust you, but I won't get specific for both the owner's sake and your sake."

"There you go again, tryna do some shit from the shadows..." Ken sighed with a shrug. "Well, I guess that's just you being you."

"Not this time. I wouldn't lend it if I planned on using it."

"I guess that's true..."

This SIM card was my backup plan if my talk with Chairman Sakayanagi didn't go well. But since it did, I wouldn't really have any use for it, at least for now. I don't mind using it for this operation, but I can't let anyone else know about it.

"By the way, Ken."

I called out to him before he was able to leave my room.

"Hm?" Ken turned around while putting his shoes on.

"Good luck on your game."

"Heh, you got it! I'll do my best."

Bonus:

When Katsuragi got back to his floor, two male students were waiting in front of his room.

"Yahiko? Jun? What are you guys doing here?"

It was his classmates, Totsuka Yahiko and Inoue Jun.

"Ahh, Katsuragi-san, welcome back!"

"Happy birthday!"

They greeted him while handing over a box of cake.

"What...?"

"What do you mean by 'what', Katsuragi-san? It's your birthday today, so it's natural to celebrate it, right?"

For someone like Katsuragi who never really celebrated his own birthday, it was certainly a weird turn of events.

"No, forgive me. Acting more confused would just be disrespectful." He received the cake and invited them to his room.

"For now, I want to thank the two of you. Since I can't really eat all of this alone, why don't you head inside my room and share it with me?"

Of course, his two friends looked delighted with the idea.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 10.1 - Go Along

Summer really is the time to have fun. For someone like me, though? Fun would be lazing around in my room reading light novels or manga. I may have lots of friends, but that was thanks to my position in the class a while ago. If I chose to hide my abilities and lay low, no one would've been remotely interested in even talking to me. Well, I guess someone like Kikyuu or Hirata might, but most of my classmates would probably just see me as that one gloomy guy.

In the end, I'm not a social kind of person. Being with a crowd drains my energy more than any physical work and talking to others isn't my forte. I wouldn't be able to last long unlike someone of Ichinose's caliber. And even then, someone like her would also get extremely drained from time to time.

Now then, what's with the whole spiel about my social ineptitude? You see, I initially planned on spending my entire day consuming narrative content, just like yesterday but...

"Kiyotaka-kun, hey! Sorry, did you wait long?"

"Oh, Ryuuko. It's fine, I just got here."

It's *what* I initially planned... But for some reason, I'm currently out here, on another shopping session with a friend. Well, it was actually a half-truth. My real plan was to buy something *and then* spend the rest of my day lazing around.

"*What will I buy?*" you ask? It's currently the 31st of August and tomorrow is the birthday of my friend, Hirata Yousuke. I consciously chose to not get any gifts in advance because I thought it'd be fine to buy something the day before. This should be the case for most of the guys who intended on buying him a present, so Ryuuko's call surprised me a bit.

She told me that she was too busy to buy anything at an earlier date. Well, I'm glad we could accompany each other.

"You look fresh in that get-up. I like it." Ryuuko grinned as she commented on my clothes. It's nothing special though-- just a decent polo and jeans.

"Your outfit looks really nice, too. It suits you," I replied.

Ryuuko wore a gray trucker jacket with a soda orange peasant blouse underneath. Paired with her top were dark denim jeans. She was already pretty enough as she is, but having a good combination

of clothes made her look even more attractive.

"Thanks," she smiled.

I don't how they do it, but my friends always look great when wearing their casual clothing. I wish I had their fashion sense.

I remember Kikuchi telling me that fashion sense can be developed. If that really was the case, then I'll do my best to learn.

"Okay then. Just as we planned last night, we'll both buy men's wear for Hirata-kun. Do you have any idea where you wanna shop?"

"Nope," I answered flatly.

"Fufun~, I thought so. Alright, follow me." Ryuuko took the lead with confidence and walked ahead.

We reached a store full of expensive clothes with the idea of creating a high base standard for our gift.

"There are a lot of nice things here, but let's look deeper. The ones outside are mostly just summer wear," she said.

We looked through different types of clothing that might suit Hirata, but Ryuuko and I just chuckled to ourselves after realizing that almost everything in this store suited someone like him.

"Hmm... So how many points do you have again, Kiyotaka-kun? I have about 290,000 left."

"I've got around 285,000 points or so," I replied.

The students in our class have received a total allowance of 399,200 private points as of August 1st. An average high school student should have an allowance of 8,000 yen a month which is equal to a 40,000-yen allowance for five months. However, this can't really apply to us who came here without bringing anything other than some clothes and personal belongings. Most of us had to buy our own everyday necessities, and a large portion of our initial budget was spent on room decorations and new clothes.

Of course, that large portion didn't apply to me given my bleak wardrobe and untouched room. That's why I won't use myself as an example. From what I know, however, it seems like the amount of money that most students (who don't have hobbies) have spent ranges from around 50,000 to 80,000 private points.

I myself had spent more than 100,000 points ever since coming here-- not on the typical things, though.

"Ohh, we're not that far apart from each other then. I've spent some points on my room and clothing, but not as much as some of the girls in our class. That said, my spending still exceeded a hundred thousand points," narrated Ryuuko. "How about you, Kiyotaka-kun? What did you spend your money on? I never saw you as the spender type, so it's pretty surprising that I have more points than you."

I would normally look for an excuse, but I wouldn't have told her the number of private points that I had if I didn't intend on telling the truth right from the start. I can just answer vaguely, and it's not like any of it matters now.

"Well, I usually get high-end ingredients for my food whenever I decide to cook... Other than that, I needed to buy some things while I was still the leader of the class."

"The cooking part, I can understand. I don't quite get what you mean by *'buying some things'*, as the class leader though." Ryuuko asked with a curious expression. It looked subtle, but I can tell that she felt excited.

"It's not a big deal," I dismissed. "It's mostly just information. Sometimes from other students, sometimes from teachers. I can't buy anything that offers an instant win, of course. But I think it's necessary if I wanted some edge on the exams."

"Ahh, that's indeed practical. But isn't it really awesome, though? To think that you'd readily spend your points for the sake of the class like a secret agent or something. Does anyone know about this?"

"Technically speaking, no." I may have mentioned the one or two specific times that I've spent private points to get something intangible like information, but talking about it in general-- I don't think so.

"Woah, I feel really special now," she smiled.

"I told you, it's not a big deal." It's not like I had anything to spend my points on, anyway-- all thanks to Professor and Ijuuin.

"Alright, alright~." Ryuuko giggled before turning around. "Now then. We're not really short on money, so it's best to just buy something here and get this over with. I'm sure Hirata-kun will be happy about it."

"I think he might even be reluctant to accept our gifts."

A guy like Hirata would probably feel bad if we got him anything too expensive.

"That's true-! Oh-! Kiyotaka-kun, I just got an idea."

"What is it?"

"Let's just buy one expensive thing and divide the cost in half," Ryuuko suggested.

"Hmm, that may be a good idea... But the item should be reasonable for two people."

"Of course~. I wouldn't have proposed the idea if I didn't have the perfect gift in mind."

Ryuuko lightly patted the hanging item on her side.

"A coat, huh?"

I checked the price tag and saw that it was around 20,000 points

worth. Of course, even a beginner like me could easily tell that the material was high quality after just a single touch.

"These are both overcoats made from high-end wool. What color do you like more?" she asked.

The two were basically the same thing, but with different shades of brown. One was tawny and one was caramel.

"I'd say the right one," I replied, choosing the caramel-colored coat.

"Alright, I think this will do as a joint gift, but I think it's better to slip in an undershirt to go with it."

To be honest, I had the same idea.

"What about this pebble gray crew neck t-shirt," I asked, showing off the shirt I took from the rack.

"Ohh, I think a standard white tee would be great, but your choice isn't half bad. Alright, let's go with that."

Ryuuko and I proceeded to pay for everything without an issue.

Our shopping went really well. We managed to buy a good gift for Hirata, and I also learned some new things from her. The overcoat that we bought was really high quality, too. I might consider getting one for myself.

"Hnnng~." Ryuuko stretched her arms with a slightly muffled moan. "It's already past 11:30-- almost noon..."

"Let's grab our lunch somewhere before going home, then. I'm getting hungry." Based on what I've learned over the past five months, I shouldn't let the girl invite me out if I could help it. That's why I hastily took the chance to ask her instead.

"Sure. Any place in mind?"

"I don't have any particular favorites. There are some restaurants and cafes that I haven't tried yet, though."

In the end, we decided on a simple family restaurant. It wasn't the most popular chain for many, but there were still a lot of people inside. Most of them were seniors, but I could see some students from Ryuuen's class.

"Alright, I'll order something that I've never ordered before." Ryuuko psyched herself with an adorable smile.

"Ohh... What is it?"

"It's nothing special," she chuckled. "I've never considered ordering it outside even though I've made and eaten it before-- omurice, that is."

It wasn't too surprising. Ryuuko was probably one of the best cooks that I know of. She could effortlessly make a simple yet good-tasting omurice on her own.

"Omurice, huh? I'll get an oyakodon then."

It didn't take long before I finished ordering. I brought our food to the table, and the two of us started eating our respective meals. I took a bite of the food I had before glancing at Ryuuko's omurice. After seeing how nicely the ketchup was dressed on top of her omelet, I suddenly had a thought.

I wonder how it would feel if I went to a maid cafe and witnessed a maid draw a heart on top of my omelet with the ketchup? Apparently, they would also do the infamous "*moe-moe kyun ♡*".

"It's not a pleasant experience... The tsundere ones aren't even tsunderes anymore. They're just mean without the dere. Of course, the food is also bad." Ijuuin's words echoed inside my ears.

It might not be the best idea if I wanted to have a good time, but I still got curious.

"Is there a problem, Kiyotaka-kun?" Ryuuko called out to me after noticing my gaze on her food.

"Hm? Oh, no, not really. I was just a bit lost in thought," I replied.

"Do you want to try my omurice? I don't mind giving you a bite."

Ryuuko grabbed a spoonful and tried to feed me. She opened her mouth as if to say "*Ahn~*".

"If you're teasing me, then you don't have to force yourself."

"Does it look like I'm teasing you? I can stop if you're not comfortable with it, though."

"It's not that I'm bothered, but your blush tells me that you're really embarrassed."

"T-That's a given! Even I'm aware of what I'm doing right now. We could easily be mistaken for a couple, so I'm taking advantage of the fact that none of our classmates or friends are here."

I sighed inwardly and ate what she offered.

Ryuuko's face instantly grew redder as a result.

"I might've said that I wasn't joking... but I didn't think you'd really eat it..." she grumbled.

"It would be rude to keep your arms hanging. If it's bothering you, then I'll ask for a new spoon."

"N-No, it's fine! Worrying about something like an indirect kiss doesn't bother me. I'm not a middle schooler."

"I guess so... But why would you even do something like that in the first place?"

"I just got curious about how it would go and feel. You and Hirata-kun are my only close friends from the guys. The opportunity came up today so I took it, and even if Hirata-kun was the one I'm with, I couldn't really do something like that because he has a girlfriend."

"What's the difference?"

"You're single, and you're open-minded enough to understand that

I just got curious. Even if someone happened to see us and misunderstood the situation, no one would get wronged," she explained. "Again, I only got curious. These things happen a lot in manga, right? I just got curious about how it would feel in real life."

"I see... You got curious. That's reasonable."

"Mhm..." She stuffed some food in her mouth with the same spoon and her cheeks were flushed pink.

Ryuuko and I continued eating after creating such a weird atmosphere. Was it her fault? Probably. But if I had Hirata or Kikuchi's social skills, the two of us wouldn't be in this predicament.

The two of us faced each other at the center of Keyaki Mall's ground floor after exiting the family restaurant.

"Did you have any plans after this?" I asked.

"Not really. I think I'm going back. I want to rest." Ryuuko replied with a sigh.

"I'm on the same boat. Let's go together then."

"Mn," she nodded.

I carried the items that we shopped for, but I'll leave them in Ryuuko's care for tomorrow. We walked back to the first-year dorms and got on the elevator. The gate opened after it reached the 4th floor and we finally got to say our goodbyes.

"Then, I'll see you tomorrow." I handed her the bag.

"Yes... Let's hang out again next time, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Of course. I had fun today, Ryuuko."

"Yes, me too. Goodbye." Her sweet smile was the last thing I saw before the elevator went on its way.

It's a bit hard to describe how I felt about this day, exactly. The two of us went out for a really short time, but because some of Ryuuko's actions caught me off-guard, I don't think I'd forget anything that happened today. I managed to go along with it, but I really hope she could stop doing stuff that would make an adolescent high school boy like me nervous.

Author's Notes:

- Nishimura Ryuuko tentative illust. from the light novel series: *"Osananajimi kara no Renai Soudan. Aite wa Oreppoi kedo Chigaurashii"*.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 11.1 - Being Popular Has Its Own Downsides

I woke up at around 4 AM to do my daily exercises and got back as soon as an hour and a half passed. I rarely saw anyone else jog out as early as I did, and even if there were, they were mostly seniors whom I didn't recognize. Of course, waking up at 4 o'clock in the morning is something that I only do whenever I sleep early. I always try to get 7-8 hours of sleep every night.

So why did I decide to sleep at around 8 or 9 PM last night? Well, to put it simply, I was exhausted. Despite having a good relationship with most of my classmates, along with my status as the class's former leader, I still got tired of interacting with everyone. It was Hirata's birthday yesterday, and lots of people came and went to his room. I was there from noon 'til early evening because I wanted to help him out with the cleaning. And honestly, socializing wore me out more than doing physical work.

Don't get me wrong, though. I'm steadily making progress. Thanks to Hirata and my other friends, I've been adjusting well with everyone for the past five months that I've been enrolled here. And now that we're in Class A, I can just focus all of my attention on further improving my social skills. Thinking about it now, I can't help but feel blessed.

After cooking some breakfast, I actually planned to take it easy. Of course, nothing goes as planned and I suddenly received a message as soon as the time neared 9 AM.

Bzzt

I grabbed my phone, and to my surprise, two messages could be read from my lock screen notifications-- two, not one-- from two separate people.

(8:57) [Kiyopon, wanna go to a fortune-teller? Everyone's yapping about them.] (Haruka)

(8:57) [Kiyotaka-kun, if you're free, do you want to check out one of the fortune-tellers at Keyaki Mall with me?] (Airi)

Airi wouldn't invite me out like this... This is giving me the 'planned' vibe. Given what I heard back at the ship, I guess they're trying to see who I'm going to choose. I was careful enough to not open the app and put their messages on read. I need to think about

this first.

I checked the class group chat and saw how hot of a topic these so-called "fortune-tellers" were. The advertisement was apparently put up around the campus three days ago. I remember seeing some posters around Keyaki Mall when I went out with Ryuuko. I guess that's what they were all about.

I started reading through everyone's messages and gathered some details.

"I knew it..." A couples-only theme, huh?

I looked through my contacts, which were filled with more than 50 different numbers, and chose to call another friend.

"Hello, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"Kikyou, are you free today?"

"Ahh... Before I answer that question, can you tell me why you're asking?"

"Apparently, there are these fortune-teller services in Keyaki Mall today. Do you wanna check it out with me?"

"Hmm... I kind of expected you to ask about that, but I thought you'd get invited by others."

As expected of her, I guess. She knows me more than anyone in this school.

"I won't lie. You're absolutely right. Airi and Haruka invited me at the same time, but you can only come with one person, right? I think their timing was planned, so choosing one over the other is a tricky decision."

"Ahh, I see. So that's how it is," she giggled. "I think it's fine to choose between one of them, though."

"Is it?"

"Of course. If it's true that they planned on making you choose, then they're also ready for the results-- that one of them won't get chosen. I don't think the loser will take much offense from it. That said, it is pretty devious of them to do you like this. But it's not like they had any other choice. They know you well enough to understand that you'd choose whoever asked first."

"I guess that makes a lot of sense. That's exactly what I would've done." I can't believe Haruka would rope Airi in her crafty schemes... Or at least, that's what I've assumed.

"Mhm~. So I totally understand that you invited me to get out of this situation."

"Yeah... Sorry about this."

"It's fine, it's fine~! That said..." Kikyou sighed in exhaustion before continuing. *"I would love to go, but I can't accept your invitation. I'm in a pretty tough spot myself, you see."*

"Do tell."

"Hondou-kun invited me out, as well, but I rejected him saying that I had other plans. When he asked me if I was going to the fortune-tellers with another guy, I told him that I didn't invite anyone and I also didn't plan on going regardless of who invited me. If I go with you and other people see us together, then I'd probably be exposed as a total liar."

"It'd be especially bad if you were with me. I think he's serious about you."

I noticed it a while ago and only confirmed it when Horikita called for our class meeting on the 22nd. Unlike Ike, Yamauchi, or Miyamoto's reactions, Hondou started to look gloomy whenever Kikyuu and I acted close. He wasn't making it look obvious but he wasn't making it look subtle either.

"Yeah... We got a bit closer after the island exam, so I think he's got the wrong idea that he has a chance. It's a huge pain in the ass, to be honest. I wish he'd just confess so I can reject him already."

"That's fine then. Maybe I'll ask Horikita."

"Ehh... Well, good luck with that. Given Horikita-san's personality, you'd be hard-pressed to make her come with you."

She has a point, but I still had to try. I immediately dialed Horikita's number as soon as I ended my call with Kikyuu.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Ah, Horikita. Sorry for calling you so early."

"No, it's fine. Do you need anything?"

"Are you free today? I thought about checking out a fortune-teller in Keyaki Mall."

"I didn't think you'd be interested in those kinds of things."

"Well, have you ever tried it?"

"No, not at all. I don't believe in it, anyway. I think it's a waste of time and money."

"Talk about harsh... If you don't have any plans, then why don't we check it out for a bit? It's our chance to sate our curiosity."

"You haven't forgotten about the main theme of this fortune-telling, have you? That's why you called me in the first place," she sighed. "I don't really mind accompanying you to meet the requirements, but wouldn't rumors pop up if people see us together like that?"

Her worries weren't ungrounded. It already happened before.

"I don't really mind the rumors as long it doesn't bother you. The same rumors would spread even if I invited another girl, anyway."

Research demonstrates that gossip is emotionally rewarding. Even if rumors about my romantic relationship weren't outright damaging, it would still bother me and the other party. The gossipers wouldn't really care about that, though. Someone with a strong mental fortitude like Horikita would probably be the best choice for me other than Kikyuu.

"Hmm, I guess you're right. Fine, I'll go with you."

I'm surprised. Persuading her has become easier nowadays.

"Alright. Let's meet at the dorm lobby before lunch."

I'll also have to tell the truth about why I invited her to avoid any future disasters.

Backreading the class group chat and calling Kikyou and Horikita took about ten minutes to complete. I don't think that's too long. For now, I'll just tell them that I already had plans to go with Horikita.

(9:08) [Sorry, I can't go with you. I already made plans with Horikita. Thanks for the invite, though.]

That was the message that I sent them. It didn't take too long before I received their replies.

(9:09) [Ohh, I see! That's fine. Have fun, you two!] (Haruka)

(9:09) [That's okay. Let's hang out next time!] (Airi)

I didn't mean to deceive them like this, but choosing one over the other would set an inevitable precedent.

SS.22 - A Friendly Battle

A buzz on Sakura Airi's electric doorbell spurred her to open up.

"Haruka-chan, you're here!"

"Yeah... Get ready, Airi. It's today."

Airi nodded with a determined face. They quickly closed the door as soon Haruka got in. It was currently 8:00 AM and the two of them started talking as they sat on Airi's bed.

"You have your clothes ready?" asked Haruka.

"Mn," nodded Airi. "How about you?"

"Yep. It's all prepared inside my room."

"Should we send him a message now?"

Airi fidgeted with a slightly embarrassed expression. The way she rubbed her supple bare thighs together would instantly stimulate any boy.

"Hmm... Knowing Kiyopon, he should be awake around this time. But then again, it's summer vacation so I'm not too sure."

"I see..."

"Well, we don't have to rush anything. For now, let's try writing our potential invitations."

Haruka smiled before leaning her body backward.

"Alright, let's do that."

Around half an hour passed after Airi and Haruka wrote their drafts while chatting with each other.

"Kiyopon, wanna go to a fortune-teller? Everyone's yapping about them." Haruka read her message out loud. "Do you think that sounds okay?"

"Sounds like you, doesn't it? I think it's fine."

"Alright, that'll be it. How about yours, Airi?"

"Kiyotaka-kun, if you're free, do you want to check out one of the fortune-tellers at Keyaki Mall with me?" she said. "How is it?"

"Ohh, isn't that good? Totally sounds natural."

"Okay, I'll send this one."

They turned to their phones and decided to send their respective messages at the same time, just as they planned. A good minute passed and the two of them just kept staring at their phones with stiff smiles.

"Haruka-chan, I'm embarrassed, after all..."

"Crap, me too... I can't believe I'm getting cold feet now, of all

times."

Their date invitations were one tap away before getting sent to the boy they like, but both of them can't seem to do it.

"Um, Haruka-chan, since you're the one who thought of this whole fortune-teller plan, I think it's better if you just invite Kiyotaka-kun yourself." Airi poked her cheek with a finger, smiling bitterly.

"What are you talking about, Airi?! We've discussed this already. Spending time with Kiyopon is already easy for us since we're friends with him. What we want out of this plan is something decisive. If the two of us invite him at the same time, we can see who he'll choose. I thought we were both ready to take a loss once he gives his answer. I know I am!"

"Ehehe, you don't have to get so worked up, Haruka-chan." Airi giggled as she held Haruka's hands with a gentle beam. "I don't really have a problem with any of this. I just thought that you were being too considerate of me. You could've invited Kiyotaka-kun a long time ago without any contention, but you still chose to let me know."

"Airi..."

"It's not that I'm running away. I'm delighted with the idea of having my fortune read with Kiyotaka-kun... But even if you snag a couple of opportunities here and there, I won't deem it as unfair because it's not. It would just be me being slow."

Haruka hugged Airi's body and rubbed her cheeks against hers.

"You're so cute, Airi~!" she said before separating herself from her. "But no, we'll have to do this together. My intentions aren't that noble, you know? It's also a calculated plan."

"What do you mean?" asked Airi.

"Say he chooses you. Depending on how things go from there, it might give me a hint that you'd have a better chance of getting together with him. If I face that reality early on, it would make giving up on him way easier. Wouldn't it drastically reduce the pain I would feel?" she smirked.

However, Airi didn't like her response. She looked at her with a frown.

"Aren't you just running away again, Haruka-chan?"

She shook her head to reassure Airi.

"Don't worry-- not this time. I'm just trying to be smart. Remember; I said that *"depending on how things go"*, which means I don't intend to give up just because he didn't choose me. If it turns out that Kiyopon is secretly head over heels for you... then, of course, I'll give up." Haruka pointed her finger at Airi with a smile. "However, if the gap between us isn't that great, then I'll work hard

to turn the tables!"

Airi understood that Haruka wanted her mindset to be the same.

"I see... If that's the case, then I'm in," she nodded with an understanding and determined smile.

At 8:57, Haruka and Airi finally managed to press send at the exact same time.

"Oh no, I'm getting really nervous..."

"M-Me too, Haruka-chan..."

They held each other's hands, waiting for his reply. However, they both noticed that none of their messages had been read yet.

"Is Kiyotaka-kun still sleeping, perhaps?"

"Maybe so... Well, let's just wait for now. He can't sleep forever."

"Mn..." Airi's eyes darted all around before asking a question. "W-Who do you think will get chosen, Haruka-chan?"

"I'll be honest, Airi. I don't have a clue. That's why I wanted us to send our messages at the same time."

"That's true," chuckled Airi. "Kiyotaka-kun would just choose whoever sends it first."

About ten minutes passed before their phones simultaneously vibrated.

"It's here! He finally replied!" exclaimed Haruka.

"Sorry, I can't go with you. I already made plans with Horikita. Thanks for the invite, though." That's what Kiyotaka-kun sent. Is yours the same?"

"Oh... Yeah, word for word..."

Their fiery enthusiasm was doused with some cold water because of his reply.

Haruka could only chuckle bitterly.

"Ahaha... To be honest, I expected Kiyonon to get invited already... Seems like he was the inviter this time, though-- and it's with Horikita-san, no less. That's pretty unexpected."

"Mn, I thought Kushida-san would make more sense."

"Well, Kyo-chan might be busy today. Who knows?"

Both of them had a bummed yet strangely relieved expression. Whether this was an ideal result for their first friendly battle or not hardly matters as long as nothing went wrong.

"This seems like *our* loss, Haruka-chan," smiled Airi.

"Yep... Wanna hang out at a cafe later?"

"Sure!"

The two of them relaxed for the rest of that day.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 11.2 - Slowly But Surely

"I'll make it up to you. I know you hate dealing with crowds."

Horikita and I were currently walking out of the building when I suddenly started the conversation.

"It's fine... Don't mind it," she sighed. "We're-- friends, aren't we?"

"I wonder what your old self would say if she hears you saying that?"

Horikita turned to glare at me.

"I'm not teasing you. It's a genuine question. You've changed a lot, you know?"

"I guess I have... But I could say the same to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Oh, care to elaborate? There's still some time before we reach Keyaki Mall."

It's around 10:30 in the morning. The fortune-telling stalls should've started their activities at 10 o'clock, so a lot of people might be there already.

"It's not something that I can explain thoroughly. I just noticed that you're a bit more relaxed lately, though it doesn't really show on your face. At first, I thought you were great at socializing. Your speech was decent and your pieces of advice were practical. However, I started to realize that you were just trying your hardest to socialize-- a total loner, like I am." Horikita shrugged as if it was no big deal.

The only difference between us was our drive to change. I did my best to make friends, while Horikita couldn't even be bothered with the idea. At first, she only acknowledged my existence because I showcased my abilities. She wouldn't have given me the same amount of respect if I chose to hide my skills.

"Seems like I was found out. I didn't have any friends when I was a child, so it was really hard for me to fit in."

"We're the same. I just didn't bother faking my personality... unlike someone," she eyed me suspiciously.

"I'm not-- Well, I guess you could say that."

Thinking like a normal high school boy, speaking like a normal high school boy, acting like a normal high school boy-- I tried my best to do all of that despite not knowing how. Though it's not like any of my attempts showed on the outside, given my appearance.

"But as you said, it's nothing too obvious," I continued.

"Of course, it wouldn't be obvious. Your doll-like veneer never changes. No one can see behind that expressionless face of yours."

That's the one thing I chose to not change. Even if I could do so, forcing myself to smile and look cheerful would be too exhausting.

"Well, *you can*." Horikita was able to see through my facade many times.

"You think I'm an idiot? I can only read you when *you let me* read you. I realized that after we made Ryuuken-kun sign that contract. You're unreadable if you want to be."

I couldn't say anything in response. She's just as sharp as her brother.

"Then again, saying you changed isn't that simple. You may be the person that I've interacted with the most in this school, but I still hardly know anything about you. I can't be confident in what I say," she said.

"I see..." If Horikita can continue fixing her defect, she'd become a formidable leader like Ryuuken or Katsuragi. She doesn't need to know anything about my past just because she's trying to learn from me.

"What about me, then? From the way you phrased your words earlier, it seems like my *"changes"* were quite noticeable. Care to elaborate?" She returned the question to me.

"Well, yeah. Even our classmates could discern them." I looked ahead, slightly upwards, and recalled. "At first, you seemed like you didn't want anything to do with the class. You were extremely cold to everyone, even to me. All of our classmates thought you were looking down on them."

"I guess that makes sense. I didn't think it was *that* bad, though." Horikita analyzed what I said without getting offended. "What changed then? I don't think I've become particularly friendly."

"You haven't. But at least you're not as inhospitable as before. Everyone finally realized that you're not cold because you don't like them-- it's just your personality." Some even call her a tsundere. "If I were to put it simply, cooperating with you isn't a pain anymore."

Horikita suddenly went into deep thought.

"Hmm... Arrogance and close-mindedness, huh? In middle school, I made do with that mindset. After all, I could excel among my peers."

"Is that not the case now?" I asked.

"It still is, but not exactly. I worked hard to reach my current level in academics and physical ability. I know I can surpass most students in our year when it comes to those. However, being alone isn't enough. That's why I decided to keep my selfishness and

intolerance in check."

She was finally getting somewhere. It seems like these five months weren't for nothing.

"At least you're aware of your past immaturity."

All she needed to do now was catch up. The current Horikita is far behind the likes of Ryuen. She'd be hard-pressed in keeping the class's position intact.

Everything aside, this should be the perfect opportunity for me to tell her the truth. My hands started sweating with the thought of Horikita walking away out of anger.

"Uh, by the way, Horikita... There's something I'd like to tell you about all this..."

"Let me guess; something happened that forced your hand to invite me today?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe *you* should be a fortune-teller."

What's with this girl? She's scary.

"It's nothing. You wouldn't invite me to something like this without an underlying reason. Under normal circumstances, you'd be with either Kushida-san, Nishimura-san, or Matsushita-san-- not counting Sakura-san and Hasebe-san, of course."

I sighed in defeat and explained everything to the clairvoyant Horikita-sensei.

September 2, 10:49 AM.

"As expected, tons of students came to get their fortunes read," I commented.

We exited the elevator and walked around the 4th floor. There were a lot of first-years around, but the seniors were equally as many. This event sure piqued the interest of young teenagers--including myself, of course.

"How childish... There's nothing supernatural about simple cold-reading," said Horikita.

We've come to terms with the possible consequences. Still, I can't help but get worried for both of us. Looking at the crowded central area, there really were a lot of couples. Some pairs even surprised me, like a guy from Ryuen's class dating a second-year girl.

"Ayanokouji-kun, there are pairs from the same gender lining up."

"They probably have to pretend like they're in a relationship."

Of course, being an actual couple was also a possibility.

The 1st floor and the 4th floor both had event halls. Horikita and I started to observe the one on this floor. One big tent was set up with three different lines. A woman could be seen overseeing the

lines, confirming the identity of each customer. There was also a written notice posted near the line; *"Guidance is for couples only. We humbly ask for your understanding."*

"Let's line up in the middle. It has the shortest line," I said.

"That's a logical conclusion, but why is that line much shorter than the others?"

"Who knows? Let's ask the attendant."

When the two of us approached said line, the woman called out to us with a gentle expression.

"Good morning, ma'am, sir. The waiting time for this line should be 10 to 15 minutes per customer (pair). Would you like to get your tickets now?" she asked in a very amiable yet professional manner.

"Yes, but... is there any difference between this line and the other two?" I asked.

"Ohh, you must be talking about the fortune-tellers. Sairenji-sensei is stationed on the left while Isamu-sensei is on the right. The one you're lining up for is Ukon-sensei."

"Why is Ukon-sensei's line shorter than the others?"

"Her readings take a bit longer than the others. They also cost more. However, she's the most popular fortune-teller among the three. They say her accuracy is really high."

"How long do the other two lines usually take?" asked Horikita.

"8 to 12 minutes per customer. One thing to note, though, dear customers. Sairenji-sensei and Isamu-sensei will only be here for today. Ukon-sensei will stay until tomorrow."

Ah, I see. It probably made the other two look like limited-edition fortune-tellers.

"What do you want to do, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I'm fine with lining up here. I just want to have my fortune read once, anyway. Does the waiting time bother you?"

"Not in the least. If I would make a rough estimate, the difference between this line and the other lines shouldn't be too drastic if we put the number of respective customers into the equation."

"Alright then." I turned to the smiling attendant. "We'll take our tickets."

And with that, the two of us started waiting in line.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 11.3 - A Vague Future

"Ayanokouji?"

"Ohh, it's Ayanokouji-kun and... Horikita-chan?!"

Two students wearing their summer clothes walked behind us.

"Kikuchi and... Mori?"

Kikuchi Eita and Mori Nene. As their classmate, seeing them together wasn't really surprising.

"Mori-san..." Horikita immediately looked exhausted after seeing her face.

"You don't have to look so repulsed with the sight of me. You'll hurt my feelings, you know?"

Meanwhile, Kikuchi approached me with a smirk.

"So what's the big news? You guys dating?" he asked.

"No," we instantly replied, in sync. Horikita seemed to have heard his question.

"Ehh... Is that the case? I really thought you guys became lovers," said Mori.

"Well, is that the case for you and Kikuchi-kun?" Horikita asked back, raising an eyebrow.

"Eita and I? Ahaha, no, no. We're just here to check things out. Having a pair is a requirement, so we came together."

"We're on the same boat, then. You don't get to assume things," scolded Horikita.

"My bad~." But Mori didn't look remorseful at all.

The two of them lined up behind us after getting their tickets.

"I'm surprised. I never thought you'd be interested in these kinds of things, Horikita-chan."

"I wasn't. Ayanokouji-kun was the one who invited me."

"So *you're* the one who's interested, huh?" Kikuchi followed up with a question directed at me.

"I guess you could say that. It's just pure curiosity. You don't get this kind of opportunity every day. I might as well try it out," I answered. "How about you guys?"

"Romantic divinations! Aren't they super interesting? Or maybe that's just my girly side talking?" Mori looked excited.

"Hmm, I'm not so sure myself. This girl's the one who invited me." Kikuchi turned to her with a provocative glint in his eyes. "Say, Nene. Since you're so interested in the romance aspect of things,

why don't we ask about *our* compatibility?"

"Huh, are you an idiot? What are you saying all of a sudden?" Mori responded with a bored expression.

Kikuchi's smile didn't disappear as he stared at her.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding," he chuckled. "Maybe some *tenchuusatsu* is fine. But just know that I'm not against it if you're willing to have the fortune-teller read our romantic future."

Mori smacked his arm with an annoyed groan.

"*Tenchuusatsu*?"

I subconsciously parroted the unfamiliar word. I wasn't the only one who was confused by it, though. My partner also tilted her head on reflex.

"You and Horikita-chan don't know? Hmm... If I were to put it in simple words, I guess it's a type of reading that tells what times are unlucky for you."

Mori explained to us what *tenchuusatsu* was. I wondered if it was similar to time-based superstitions like "*wear the color red during this day*" or "*be careful not to lose something this month*" which was, admittedly, the limit to my fortune-telling knowledge.

"I'm surprised you know about it, Nene. I thought you were just an ignorant brat who came here for the romance stuff." Kikuchi teased Mori with his usual smirk.

"Are you mocking me?" she glared.

"Well... After what I saw back at the ship"

"S-Stop-! Stop talking!" Mori continuously punched Kikuchi's arm in desperation.

"Alright, alright. Calm down, will you? We're bothering other customers." Kikuchi's laugh contrasted his words.

The two of us observed them with side glances. They seem to be in their own world.

"The two of them are usually calm but they can get pretty rowdy when they're together," Horikita commented with a sigh.

"True." My brief response solicited another sigh.

I know a bit more about Kikuchi's side of things. He's been pretty vocal about liking Mori. And from what I can see, they seem close enough to even joke about it. So Mori is aware of his feelings, huh? The fact they can still get along like this meant they're in a "*more than friends, less than lovers*" relationship. Of course, this is pure speculation on my part.

On the outside, Kikuchi might've looked like a gigolo hitting on his next target and Mori couldn't be bothered with his advances. But no matter how composed she tried to act, the redness of her cheeks and ears was too apparent for anyone who pays attention.

Kikuchi wouldn't miss something like that.

"Next please!" The attendant called for us with a smile.

"Oh, it's finally your turn. Have fun in there, Ayanokouji."

"See you later, Horikita-chan!"

After a little over an hour, the couple before us finally got out of the tent. Horikita and I entered the tent following our brief goodbyes to Kikuchi and Mori.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. Please come in."

When the two of us entered, we found a chamber that looked like something out of a reality show. The room wasn't well-lit with only around 30 lux of light. The fortune-teller called "Ukon-sensei" appeared to be an elderly woman, although I couldn't see her face which was hidden under a hood. She perched herself comfortably on a grand yet old-looking chair. On the table were a bulky tome and some kind of crystal ball. It looked like one of those balls you chuck around in the hammer throw in track and field-- just a bit more translucent.

The crystal ball immediately began to glow as soon as Horikita and I got near. There were two stools in front of the fortune-teller. When we sat down, she made an aged chuckle before lightly moving her right hand.

"First... you must pay," she commanded.

She pulled out a small card reader from under the table and placed it before us. Such a product of modern civilization felt out of place because of the current atmosphere. Of course, we knew we'd have to pay for the service.

Seeing our silence, the old lady took the initiative to move things along.

"A healthy pair young'uns, eh? Do you happen to know anything about fortune-telling?"

"I'm afraid I don't. How about you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I honestly have no idea."

"I see. Well, fret not. I may have promoted the theme for this caravan, but I can read pretty much anything. It can be about love-life, as you'd guess, academics, career, etcetera."

She gave us a list of "*packages*" that were oddly mismatched with their price. There's the "*Basic Plan*" which included the services she just mentioned. After reading through some of the other packages, one of them might've been related to the *tenchūsatsu* reading that Kikuchi mentioned earlier.

"See the end of your life...? Absurd..." Horikita muttered softly while reading the list.

After scanning the list one last time, I noticed that there were lots of options related to romance which made sense given the theme. Regardless, the prices were still doable for us.

"The other packages will be worth your time. I know you're not after the love-related plans, after all."

"How are you so sure?" Horikita narrowed her eyes.

"Just a hunch, little lass. Of course, you can choose it just to spite me."

Horikita couldn't respond. The fortune-teller was one sharp lady. She instantly concluded that we weren't a couple.

"I'll do the Wanderer's Plan, please."

I glanced over at Horikita who was still in the process of choosing.

"I'll take the Filiation Plan," she said.

It felt like placing an order at a restaurant. We presented our student ID card after choosing the corresponding package.

"Very well, let's start with the young lady. What's your name?"

"Horikita Suzune," she answered flatly.

"When I tell fortunes, I see the face, the hand, and then the heart of the person I'm reading. I may see something that you won't like. Are you prepared for that?" asked the fortune-teller.

"Please do what you normally do. I don't mind," replied Horikita.

I managed to see Ukon-sensei's wrinkled skin under her hood, along with a sharp gleam in her eye. She instructed Horikita to extend both of her hands.

"We'll start with a palm reading," she said. "I see a long life ahead of you. You have a long, long life to look forward to. However, behind such life is an arduous path. Right now, you are still on that path."

That was a pretty typical start. I couldn't imagine that a person could divine such things just by looking at the lines on someone's palm. Maybe these readings were based on Ukon-sensei's personal experiences.

"Your academic excellence is remarkable and it'll stay that way as long you work for it. You won't have any troubles with money either as long you stay as thrifty like the way you are now." After a short pause, she continued. "Hmm... You ought to take care of your body more. Illness and unfortunate physical events are your enemies. Lastly, you don't seem to be interested in the concept of love. A lover might let you see more of life, but the cost would be some opportunities that pertain to your success, especially here in school."

Her words are pretty vague so far, but almost all of them were very relevant to Horikita. It's amazing on the surface, but if she's

doing her readings based on how she judged Horikita's personality, then it makes sense. Her readings about her health were eerily accurate, but they could be applied to any person.

"Overworking will be your bane, both physically and mentally. Ask for the help of your friends whenever you need it. Your financial stability could also collapse very easily no matter how careful you are as you will be forced to make big decisions in the future." She continued after a brief pause. "Do not close yourself to others when it comes to love. Learn it for you know little. Being aware of it will give you an advantage."

Ukon-sensei let go of Horikita's hands.

As her friend, I knew that the warnings were precise. It may not show on her face, but Horikita was probably impressed, too-- even if it's just a little bit.

"Well then, it's time for the additional readings."

The Filiation Plan focused on one's relationships with the people around them, mainly with their family. That's what I've read.

"May I ask about your family members? What do you want to know about them?"

Horikita pursed her lips in hesitation, but immediately swallowed those feelings and answered.

"I have a brother..."

"Oh? Does he attend this school?" asked Ukon-sensei.

"Yes..."

She was right on the money, but that was a pretty safe assumption in question form.

"I see..." She hovered her hands on top of the crystal ball which had some sort of fog swirling around inside it. "Would you say that your relationship with him is in a dire situation?"

"Yes. For him, I'm nothing but a disappointment." Horikita's response felt despondent.

Only two people were present to hear this. One was a professional who probably didn't care about hearing personal stuff from her customers. The other was a friend who knows about the stuff she was saying. To Horikita, there was no harm in delving into this.

"Strange... That's not what I'm seeing here," Ukon-sensei replied.

"Eh-?"

"It is hazy, but your brother doesn't necessarily see you as a disappointment. Both of you are excellent individuals, but you are hellbent on taking the same path as him. You can either stay on this current path, which is filled with thorns and glass shards... or go back to your old and original path to get to him closer."

"Old path?"

"It is alright to be confused. Your old path has long been buried under the chasm of time," she said. "You need not be too worried, however. Your fate is heading in the right direction. You were once astray, but someone came along to guide you. Everything else is up to your good judgment. Your brother's true view of you will become clear in the near future."

"Is that... so...?" Horikita was innately skeptical about all this, but hearing the fortune-teller's advice still made her think.

Ukon-sensei proceeded with Horikita's other family members, but based on her reactions, the typical fortune readings regarding them hardly mattered compared to her brother's.

After some more readings about her life along with some advice, Horikita's turn finally ended. Most predictions sounded ordinary with some warnings here and there. Nothing seemed particularly life-threatening.

"Thank you very much," she bowed gracefully.

Horikita inched herself to the side.

It was finally my turn. I'd probably go through the same process. My partner seemed satisfied with what she heard. They were vague and conventional, yes. But most of the things that the fortune-teller had said were strangely relevant to her. Regardless of whether it was a coincidence or not, I was still fairly impressed.

"What is your name, young lad?"

"Ayanokouji. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka," I replied.

I was asked to extend my hand like Horikita.

"Hmm, you have a good fortune with your academics, but your future seems to be unclear. Do not worry, however. This means you're excellent enough to control said future. I also don't see you suffering any sort of major illness in the near future but be very careful with physical injuries. Your wealth comes and goes, so you must be wise. Like the lass beside you, big decisions will be made regarding money. It is inevitable for the two of you."

Ukon-sensei took a bit of her time before continuing.

"Strange. Your fortune in love is a healthy one, but wildly uncertain. For yourself, this decision will be life-changing-- that much is obvious. That goes for your partner, as well. In contrast, your decision won't matter too much in the grand scheme of things. That is the common fate of most humans. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes... I think so."

"Oh, you do? Would you care to tell me why?" she asked.

"People live their own lives. As third parties, unless they're directly involved in my romance, my decision should hardly affect them."

For example, if I chose to accept Inogashira or Ichihashi's

confessions, our friend groups would probably react in some way. This extends to our other classmates. The students outside our class might also care given my reputation. But that's about it. People would stop caring after a while and everything would go back to normal.

"Yes, that is true. That is how it *usually* goes. However, your fortune tells the opposite. Depending on your decision, the future would change drastically. Not just for you and your romantic partner, but also for many many people."

That is a strong claim, but I'd have no way of disproving it. The only way to confirm her prediction is to go back in time and see the difference... which is obviously impossible. To put it simply, Ukon-sensei is talking about a large-scale butterfly effect that stems from my decision in romance. Isn't that just a visual novel?

"I see... It seems that you had a harsh childhood," she continued.

Another broad statement. I'm sure everyone would claim to have gone through one or two harsh experiences as a child, especially boys. I wish she could give me a more concrete answer.

Also, I just noticed it, but do fortune-tellers see into the past in order to divine the future? Just like in Horikita's turn, Ukon-sensei was now talking about *my* past.

"This is..." Ukon-sensei stopped moving her hands. "You're the holder of the fate *tenchuusatsu*!"

Horikita narrowed her eyes and looked at me. *Tenchuusatsu* was a word that we only learned earlier. We were more confused than amazed by this revelation. I thought it was a type of reading, but now it's a type of fate?

"Both of you look bewildered but know that this is incredible. You see, wielding this fate is a double-edged sword. It's not as simple as living a life of constant misfortune. Sure, there are harsh negatives: you won't have the blessing of your parents or your family. However, the rest is up to you, individually. You alone decide what you can and can't do," she explained.

Under her flinty expression were eyes of compassion.

"You don't need to be so pessimistic, and you don't need to act like you're starring in a comedy, either."

She let go of my hands and hovered her own hands on top of the crystal ball.

"This must be fate. Since you chose the Wanderer's Plan, I can further read into your journey in this school. Listen carefully now, lad."

I glanced at Horikita who quietly listened to everything.

"Hoho, as expected. Your journey will rely heavily on your social relationships. Your individual abilities are more than enough to get

you through, but you will change drastically if you continue interacting with the people around you."

Ukon-sensei proceeded with the predictions.

"I see a coin. Even with its two sides, it is but a single coin. You are able to draw out the best in each face.

I see a chess piece. The towering trials of the mind will stimulate your emotions. You will feel familiarity and solace in its presence.

I see a handkerchief. It covers and hides what's inside, but it also helps remove the tears of others. You are able to open this handkerchief, fold it gently, and carry the burden inside it.

I see a necklace. You have a strong fate with this necklace. It will change you for the better as much as it'll change because of you, but you must understand what it means to cherish it.

I see a book. Different from the solace of competition, this book grants you peace, albeit temporarily. Embrace it, and you may find this peace becoming permanent on your journey here.

I see a photograph. It allows you to see an opposite perspective. The perspective of the common and peaceful days of a normal person.

I see a cup of coffee. It will energize your life as a student and you will never find your journey boring for the rest of your remaining years here. Choose it and see if it can make you smile.

I see a nice meal. You'll spend a great deal of time preparing it and of course, it will not disappoint. You will see how effort can change the course of fate because of it.

I see a cotton cloth. In your head, this cloth is the perfect choice. It will better you and aid you every time you wear it, but whether it can truly make you happy is yet to be known.

I see a sunflower. As the bright contrast that holds both normalcy and mystery, you will inevitably see its charm. However, your encounter will not be a coincidence but rather, fate."

Ten items. Given her words, should I assume that these items equate to people I'd interact with?

"You seem intrigued, lad. My reading has allowed me to see six more items. Would you like to know about them?" she asked.

"I am curious, yes, but I think these ten are more than enough... If it's okay, I'll make do with just knowing what those last six items are."

"Why of course. I saw a ribbon, an earring, a cushion, a white dress, a bracelet, and a crown. Since you're satisfied with what you've heard already, everything else will be up to you." Ukon-sensei smiled as she finished her reading.

"Thank you very much," I bowed.

The things I've been told today were genuinely interesting. However, they were all just fortune-telling, at the end of the day. I

didn't really feel too excited about hearing a bunch of vague predictions.

Horikita and I went out of the tent and said our goodbyes to Mori and Kikuchi whose turns were up.

Author's Notes:

Kiyotaka and Horikita had their fortunes read on the first day (arrived at 10:50 AM).

Kiyotaka met Ibuki on the first day (10:00 AM) and left the mall at around the same time after a short conversation. They had their fortunes read the next day during the afternoon (around 3:00 PM). The elevator incident wouldn't happen until then.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 11.4 - Unclear Path

"So that was your first ever fortune-telling experience?" I asked.

"Yes. The same goes for you, correct?"

"Yep. It was interesting, for sure. How was it for you?"

"Honestly, my knowledge in fortune-telling is limited to what I've seen in morning television shows. I have to admit that I was fairly impressed and satisfied with what I've heard."

Ukon-sensei's predictions for Horikita were strangely germane to her current life. I can see why she'd be impressed. But then again, Horikita's natural attitude made it easier for good cold-readers to guess her personality. With that information, they can make educated predictions based on their judgment.

The same goes for mine...

"I see. Well, you've saved me from quite a bit of trouble. Let me treat you for lunch."

"You're well aware that I have more points than you, right?"

"Yeah, but I have more than enough to pay for two expensive lunches. And besides, *you're* the class leader. You ought to save your points in case of emergency."

Horikita fixed her sling bag before replying.

"I guess you have a point."

On September 1st, which was also Hirata's birthday, every student finally received their monthly allowance. Class A, our class, got 121,200 private points following our recent promotion. Everyone rejoiced. It's an amount of money that no normal student wouldn't have access to.

Right now, my 405,885 points should be more than enough to go by.

Horikita and I ate in one of the few gourmet restaurants found in Keyaki Mall instead of a fast-food chain. With a total of 15,000 points, our lunch was much more akin to that of a feast. As elegant as Horikita was, her appetite was still apparent considering how she cleanly finished her portion... not that I'm one to talk. The whole fortune-telling ordeal really put a strain on our stomachs-- but it was mostly the waiting line.

"Well then." Horikita nodded slightly right before the elevator gate opened on the dorm's 4th floor. "Thank you for inviting me out today, regardless of your reasons."

"I should be the one thanking you."

"I had fun. You also treated me to a nice restaurant." She smiled, albeit very slightly. "I'll be contacting you and the rest of the class regarding the point rewards. Hirata-kun and I will be receiving them tomorrow."

"Sure. See you around before summer ends, leader," I teased.

"Don't call me that, former leader." Of course, Horikita didn't waste any time in countering back.

I got out of the elevator car as the conversation ended. The two of us exchanged minuscule grins towards each other before the gate closed itself. I thought about our first encounters back in April.

She's grown quite far from her former unpolished self. It's only a matter of time before she becomes a formidable leader. I'm looking forward to your future endeavors, Horikita.

--endeavors paved from defeat.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 12.1 - Fate and Control

The next day, on the 3rd of September, the school finally opened the pool for every student to enjoy. The Ayanokouji Group immediately made its plans. Akito and Haruka handled the reservations while Airi and I got to work with some purchases. Ken was supposed to come with us, but he should attend his club today if he wanted tomorrow off.

"So you're not wearing your swimsuits?" I asked.

"N-No way! It's too embarrassing..."

"Well, it's not like I'm one to talk. I'll be wearing a rashguard like you, too."

We figured that the first day would result in a packed pool, so preparing now and going tomorrow instead was the ideal plan.

I left the work to Airi the moment we entered the clothing store. Since I didn't really have the best eye on this stuff, I just decided to act as her escort.

Airi happily went to me whenever she wanted to purchase something and I'd give my amateur opinion on it. I would obviously try my best to give a productive response, but my inability ended up making her hear boring answers like *"It looks good."* or *"It seems like a nice fit."*... Airi, who understood my lack of fashion sense, took my words with a gentle smile.

The two of us finished shopping at around 1:40 PM. The store we shopped at was, coincidentally, on the 4th floor. Airi suggested chilling inside a cozy cafe on the 2nd floor, but the elevator we used to get up was crowded. We headed towards the other elevator, passing through the ongoing fortune-telling caravan in the event hall.

"It's still here..." commented Airi.

"Sorry I couldn't go with you yesterday."

"I-It's fine, Kiyotaka-kun. It couldn't be helped since you already had plans."

I moved my eyes from the panicked Airi towards the tent.

"Do you want to give it a go?"

"E-Eh-?! But didn't you already..."

"The fortune-teller was sharp enough to find out my real relationship with Horikita. I don't think she'd be weirded out if I brought another friend along-- if she even managed to remember

me."

If Airi wants to go, then I'd probably just buy the Basic Plan. Well, given how she's been staring at the tent, I'm sure she wants to give it a try.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

"Yeah. We have tons of free time today, and not too many people are lining up since it's already the second day. It should close up at around 5:00 PM, so we have a bit of time if you want to drop by at a cafe. "

There's also the fact that the pool is open already.

"I'm okay." Airi nodded cutely, her face determined. "Let's go in."

And we lined up.

Ukon-sensei was the last fortune-teller on-site, and after a few more pairs lined up behind us, the attendant lady finally closed the waiting line.

"How was your experience with Horikita-san yesterday?" she asked.

"It was alright. The fortune-teller's words were interesting, to say the least."

"Ohh... I'm looking forward to it, then. It's my first time having my fortune read. How about you, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"It was our first time, too-- both Horikita and I. I didn't expect to come back this quickly, though."

"S-Somehow, sorry..." Airi apologized with a bitter smile.

"I told you, it's fine." I lightly patted her head, which probably looked strange from an outsider's perspective given my dull expression. At times like this, I wish I could grin naturally like how Hirata and the others can. That would probably give Airi some better reassurance.

Before the atmosphere turned awkward, I tried to keep the conversation going by changing the topic.

"By the way, do you have any idea why Haruka assigned me in buying clothes with you instead of herself?"

Airi flinched after hearing the question.

"I... I-I have no idea..." Her eyes darted around.

She was obviously lying, but I don't think I needed to pry for an answer.

"I see..." I thought our chitchat would end there, but I suddenly remembered the thing Airi was working on for the past month or so. "How did the photography contest go?"

"Oh, the contest? I submitted my entry not too long ago." Her panic was replaced with a grin. "Ah-! I forgot to show it to you guys! Only Haruka-chan and some girls managed to see the finished product a while ago."

"That's fine. I'm sure we'll see your submission when the winners are announced. They'll be displayed by the main bulletin, right?"

"No, no. You overestimate me, Kiyotaka-kun. Some amazing seniors participated, you know? I'd be happy if I could even make it as an honorable mention..." Airi lightly scratched her cheek with a finger. "Of course, it'd be nice if my hard work was rewarded, but since it's my first time joining a competition like that, I don't really want to expect too much. After all, I'm already plenty satisfied knowing that I did my best."

"That in itself is already amazing, Airi. I think it's alright for you to be more confident."

The Sakura Airi now and the Sakura Airi back then are almost indistinguishable in some aspects. Once she comes out of her shell completely, more and more people would surely want to befriend her. And if Airi decides to stop disguising herself as a plain-looking girl, she could be someone that could rival the likes of Kikyou or Ichinose when it comes to popularity. Whether she could manage to do that is still up for debate, however.

"Next please."

The two of us were finally called. Airi and I entered the chamber that was already familiar to me. Approaching the same pair of stools, Ukon-sensei slightly raised her head to give me a sharp glint.

"Well, well, well... It's my first time seeing someone have their fortune read two times in a row. You didn't look intrigued after hearing my readings, so this is quite the surprise." Her aged voice made Airi flinch for a second. "This time, with a different lass. What a way to take my readings."

That was probably her way of calling me a playboy.

"U-Um, Kiyotaka-kun and I are not in that kind of..." Airi's gentle protest was met with her creepy chuckle.

"It's alright, young lady. He must've taken you here as a detour."

"Eh-?! How did you know...?"

Ukon-sensei only smiled meaningfully. Due to the atmosphere, Airi's mind was probably filled with the idea of supernatural fortune readings. That's why she forgot about the bags we were carrying.

"First... you must pay."

In the same fashion, she pulled out the card reader for Airi and me to use.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, right?" While Airi was choosing a package, Ukon-sensei suddenly addressed me. "There wouldn't be any point in me reading your fortune again, so you can opt to stay back and relax. That is, unless, you wish to purchase a specific package."

"Hmm... I think I'll be fine. How much is a simple palm reading?"

"A palm reading is easy enough, so I'll give you one for free."

However, don't expect me to read too much."

"How kind of you."

"Your words don't fit your facial expression, lad. But you're welcome. Give me your hands. I'll read your fortune first."

The Basic Plan costs 5,000 points, which was obviously within my budget, but I don't mind getting a freebie.

"Oh? Nothing seems particularly odd. If I were to give you some advice, taking any more detours wouldn't be the greatest of ideas. If possible, go straight home. Straying from that path might get you stuck for quite a long time." She promptly let go of my hands.

"Stuck?"

"Don't worry. Even if you do get stuck, you'll be fine as long as you don't panic. You and the little lass should be able to overcome it as long as you work together."

Airi listened with a fascinated expression. After choosing the Compeer Plan with an enthusiastic attitude that she wouldn't otherwise show outside, Ukon-sensei's real reading began.

"What's your name, young lady?"

"S-Sakura Airi..."

After receiving Airi's dainty hands, she started off with some typical stuff derived from her basic palm reading. Her predictions regarding Airi's career, academics, health, and love life weren't too out of the ordinary. That said, they weren't as relevant to her current life unlike how her words were for Horikita's.

Given Airi's adorable show of zeal, Ukon-sensei might've judged her with a bit of inaccuracy.

"Do you happen to like photos?"

Huh? Where did that come from?

"Um, yes, I do! I like photos... and taking photos."

"I see, I see. In my vision, I saw your fortune as a bunch of photos. Some were clear, some were not. But I can assure you one thing; as long as you continue to work your hardest, you shall get what you deserve. The Compeer Plan looks into the people around you at this current time and how they will affect your future. However, I have chosen to look into your immediate future, specifically, your three years inside this school."

"That's... amazing..."

"Well, I won't sell myself to you as someone who always gets things right, little lass, even if I should, from a business standpoint..." Her smile towards Airi was gentle but enigmatic. "After all, there's always the possibility of *not* being able to stay here for three years."

"You mean to say... that I might get expelled?" Despite such a grim warning, Airi didn't sound as terrified as one would expect.

"In that specific aspect, your fate is unclear, which is a good thing. It means you have the power to control it."

Those were the same words she'd told me.

After that mysterious warning, Ukon-sensei proceeded with her predictions. All of them encompassed Airi's fortune with her friends and peers in accordance with the package she bought.

"The strings of fate all come back to you. You are the one in the center... for it is your life. If you don't do anything to pull them closer, then none of those strings will snap. However, all of them would continue to stray away." Ukon-sensei gently caressed Airi's hand before letting it go. "Being proactive might be the best advice I could give. After all, your fortune is worse than that of an ordinary person's. Unless you seriously move to change things, fate will not show mercy."

Airi listened very intently, but her face tells me that she could hardly understand what her peculiar words mean in the practical world. Of course, it was the same for me, especially since it's not my fortune. During her elaborate explanations, the one thing I understood was her encouragement for Airi to be more proactive. It was a very generic piece of advice that could apply to literally anyone.

"Um, thank you very much!"

"The Compeer Plan focuses on your friends. As far as I can see, they will continue to care about you in the future-- all of them apart from one."

Airi thought her reading was finished, but one final revelation caught her off-guard.

"This person is dear to you and from what I saw, this person cares for you as well. However, depending on what happens in the future, they'll either be your savior... or your *executioner*."

"Is... that so...?" Airi trembled. She was nervous. But in the end, she faced that last prediction with a determined expression. "I understand. I'll try my best."

"An honorable attitude. Because of that, I'll give you one little bonus. Come closer, lass."

"Eh? Um, okay..." Airi approached the fortune-teller close enough to hear her soft whispers.

After a few seconds...

"E-Ehhh-?!"

"What did she say?" I reflexively asked Airi.

"Oh, um..." she glanced at the smiling fortune-teller whose eyes were hidden under her hood. "I-It's a secret... for now."

"Oh... Okay, gotcha." I guess it's something very private and personal.

"Thank you very much. We'll be going now." Airi bowed deeply as we prepared to leave.

"No matter. Go on, young'uns. Oh, and be careful of downpours, lass." Ukon-sensei waved her hand as if to shoo us away along with that last warning.

I still have mixed feelings, but this whole fortune-telling stuff can really pique one's interest. According to philosopher and psychologist William James, curiosity is "*the impulse towards better cognition*". As humans, we strive to learn everything as soon as we can. After all, knowing more results in a better chance for survival. That includes the future, especially with modern humans who seek pleasure, happiness, comfort, and security. It's probably one of the main reasons why fortune-telling, despite being a logic-defying concept, is insanely popular.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 12.2 - Chain of Misfortune

"Did you have fun?"

Airi and I walked out of the tent. I glanced at her side profile, seeing her satisfied smile.

"Mn, that was really fun! Thanks for taking me there, Kiyotaka-kun."

The contents of fortune-telling were partially template-based. They mix common generalizations with truths based on cold-reading deductions. If done properly, their words could easily excite the listener.

"The waiting line was a bit of a pain, but as long as you're happy with the result..." I peeked down at the café on the 2nd floor and my thirst for liquid consumption amplified. "You still wanna head to that café for a drink?"

"Yes... I'm pretty parched. How about you?"

"I'm the same. Let's go there before we go home."

However, it was the elevator near the event hall that was crowded this time.

"As expected, the 4th floor is still packed with people, isn't it?" commented Airi.

The two of us walked towards the other elevator and entered without any incident. It didn't seem like anyone else would enter with us, so I pressed the button to close the car door. We felt the elevator move downwards. I stared at the "4" on the indicator when Airi suddenly brought something up.

"Oh... That's right, Kiyotaka-kun... Didn't the fortune-teller tell us not to make a detou-"

When the light signaled our arrival on the 3rd floor, the elevator made a loud-screeching noise before stopping.

"Kyah-?!"

Airi stumbled to the side right before she could finish her sentence. It's a good thing that I managed to catch her in my embrace.

"You okay?"

"U-Um... Yes... I-I'm okay..."

It was initially pitch-black as the lights went out so I couldn't see

Airi's face. After a few seconds, the emergency lights finally turned on.

"It must be a power outage," I said.

Airi gasped before fixing her posture. Her cheeks were very flushed, probably from the embarrassment of being held by a guy.

"Kiyotaka-kun, are we stuck in here...?" asked Airi.

She didn't seem panicked at all. I can tell that she was anxious, but being able to ask that question calmly meant that she doesn't feel too terrified.

"Hmm... We technically are at the moment. I don't think there's anything to worry about, though. The elevators have measures for events like this one."

"Mn, maybe we can use that." Airi pointed at the emergency phone beside the control panel. "I-I'm not good with talking though..."

"Even more reason for you to do it. Think of it as practice."

"E-Ehh...?" Airi pouted before pointing her finger at me. "Kiyotaka-kun, aren't you the same as me, though?"

"Geh-..." I've been seen through.

"You just don't want to deal with talking to adults. That's why you want *me* to do it."

I hung my head apologetically.

"Sorry... You're right."

Airi's sulking expression turned into a huge smile.

"If you admit it, then I'm satisfied." She picked up the phone and pressed the call button. "I'll do my best."

There's a surveillance camera watching us. And if the emergency phone can't contact anyone, we can use the intercom connected to the emergency dispatch center.

"Hmm... No one seems to be responding," said Airi before trying the intercom. "Here, too... What do we do, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"This is quite the series of unfortunate events, but it's not like we have anything to worry about. Your phone still has some charge left, right?"

"Yes, it does. I'll call the emergency hotline. It should be right... here...?"

"A prank like this is evil," I muttered.

The number that Airi tried to call could be found right beside the button panel. However, thanks to some jerk who probably thought they were hilarious, the last four digits were scribbled over with a magic marker.

"We could just call one of our friends from outside to ask for help, right?"

"Yeah... It's a longer, more roundabout method, but a surefire

way to get out of here. We can use mine if you want, too. My battery's still basically full."

Given my past position as the class leader, contact with my classmates was inevitable. A smartphone was probably our single most important weapon. That's why I made a habit of charging mine whenever I'm not using it.

"Ehehe, me too. Ever since I became friends with Haruka-chan and you guys, I found myself worrying about my phone's battery life. It'd be bad if we can't contact each other when something comes up."

"Like emergencies, huh?"

Airi giggled happily before tapping on her phone.

"Ah, hello, Haruka-chan?" Airi greeted her before putting the call on speaker.

"Airi? What's up? Are you alright? The power went out all of a sudden."

"So it's not just Keyaki Mall," I said.

"Oh, Kiyopon~! You guys are still together, huh?"

"H-Haruka-chan... You see, we're in a bit of a bind."

"Hm, what do you mean?"

"Well, Kiyotaka-kun and I-- we're... stuck inside the elevator."

"Ehhhhhh-?!"

"W-We tried asking for help from the inside, but the emergency communication lines aren't working right now. It'd be nice if you could call someone for us-"

"Leave it to me!"

And Haruka briefly hung up. We didn't even get the chance to say thank you.

"I guess we're saved now."

"Haruka-chan seemed to be in a hurry to call for help," chuckled Airi.

The only thing we could do now was to sit and wait. The two of us didn't panic which was great. If we're lucky, someone might even notice us before Haruka manages to get help. Trying to escape would expose us to the risk of getting hurt.

Of course, that's also when our optimistic thoughts were instantly shattered. We suddenly heard a loud grinding noise inside the elevator. The pleasantly cool air emanating from the vent stopped.

"Eh...?" For the first time, since the start of this crisis, Airi finally looked upset.

We were currently trapped inside a small, enclosed container while summer was at its peak. It's only a matter of time before the

heat affects us. We were fine right now, but we'll be sweating buckets very soon.

"Um, Kiyotaka-kun..."

"Yeah, I know. Worst-case scenario; we could suffer from heatstroke."

"I'm sure we'll get sweaty if it takes too long, so I'll send Haruka-chan a text to get my uniform from the laundries. Do you want her to bring you some clothes, too?"

"I'm good, thank you."

After she sent the message, Airi looked at me with a bitter smile.

"This is pretty bad, huh...?"

"Now that it has come to this, getting out as soon as we can should be the ideal plan."

"B-But do you think we can escape on our own?"

"Well, there's an emergency hatch on top of us. I don't know if it'll work, but I'll try to open it."

Bang

I jumped to try and push the hatch upwards, but it didn't budge.

"It's probably locked from the outside."

Under normal circumstances, you can't really open an escape hatch from the inside. It's there as a last resort for rescuers to get people out of the elevator if the doors were unusable.

"So we're trapped until Haruka-chan manages to call for help?"

"Probably."

Airi and I ultimately decided to wait, not because we wanted to, but because it was the only option we had. I took off my jacket and sat down on the opposite side. Keeping our distance from each other was probably the best option if we wanted to slow down the heating. Still, with the passing time and rising temperature, Airi's breathing started to get ragged.

"Are you alright, Airi?"

"Hah... Um, yes... I think so..."

Sweat started to trickle down from her forehead. Airi made a futile attempt to fan herself with her hand but to no avail. She eventually removed her glasses to wipe the sweat around her eyes, but even her hands were wet from her own perspiration.

Meanwhile, my shirt was so soaked that it looked like I stood under a waterfall. The situation had gotten significantly more dangerous than I previously imagined. This elevator was installed into Keyaki Mall's external wall. I hadn't noticed that before because of the air conditioning, but it would get extremely hot under these conditions.

Children have died after being stuck inside locked cars in the middle of summer, and the same danger can apply to adults, too. A

little more and the two of us would probably suffer from heatstroke.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun... I'm- I think I'm starting to feel dizzy." Airi was panting heavily, and her clothes were extremely drenched. Since we don't know if the cameras are working, stripping might be too much of a request, especially since she's trapped inside with a guy. But even then, this was a matter of life and death. I removed my top to set an example.

"Hyah-?! K-K-Kiyotaka-kun?"

"It's too hot at this point. You might faint if you don't do the same. Don't worry. I'll turn around and not look. I won't move an inch from where I am, as well."

"E-Eh... Um, uhh..." As expected, Airi would be conflicted.

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to force you. It's much harder for you as a girl, especially since you're wearing a dress. If help comes and the elevator opens up, you'd be exposing your entire body, only covered in undergarments."

Airi gripped the hem of her dress and her plump thighs started to show.

"I... I can't take it anymore, Kiyotaka-kun... My head feels like it's getting fried..." Airi softly cried. I was unable to distinguish whether the liquid streaming down her cheeks was sweat or tears.

Finally, Airi's eyes started to close as her body collapsed to the side.

I quickly moved to catch her body, which felt like it was on fire.

At that moment, the elevator started to move again. I could only hope that everything was back to normal as I held Airi's barely conscious body. She tried her best to get up as I put my shirt on. After a few seconds, the elevator finally arrived and stopped on the 1st floor. The doors slowly opened as cool air started to flow inside. Two adults greeted us with shocked expressions.

"Are you alright?! Are you hurt?!"

"I'm alright, but..." I looked at Airi who was still trying to compose herself.

"I-I'm fine! I'm alright..." she insisted.

"Airi, Kiyopon!"

Haruka emerged from behind them and hugged Airi.

"Haruka, let her cool down first," I said.

"Ah-! S-Sorry..." Haruka flinched and let go.

"It's alright, Haruka-chan. But I reek of sweat right now, so it's best to not touch me just yet."

Airi and I were offered some sports drinks as we got out of the elevator. They could only guess how hot it was, but given our really sweaty state, it made sense for them to send us to the doctor's office for examination.

As expected, Airi almost suffered from heatstroke, but the physician said she'll be alright as long she changes her clothes as soon as possible.

"Don't worry, Airi. I got what you asked for."

"Thank you, Haruka-chan."

She slipped inside the female restroom, which was adjacent to the doctor's office, to get changed. After her figure disappeared, Haruka's phone suddenly vibrated.

"Geh- Seriously...?" She looked at me with a sharp glare. "Kiyopon, I have many questions about your time with Airi inside that elevator, but they'll have to wait for now."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"It's about our plans for Kayoko-chan's birthday, so I gotta bounce." I thought she was angry for some reason, but her mood switched back to normal as she started to briskly walk away. "Ah, don't tattle on her about this, okay?! It's a surprise, after all! Tell Airi I said goodbye~!"

We waved our hands to each other but I was slightly confused. I sat inside the doctor's office and waited. I continued wiping myself with a provided towel while enjoying the cool air from the A/C.

"You must've had a rough time in there," said the female physician who looked like she was in her forties.

"Yes..."

"Well, you should *go straight home* and rest after your cute girlfriend finishes changing."

I was too exhausted to deny the girlfriend part. All I could think about right now was how fortune-telling is serious business.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 12.3 - Changing at One's Pace

"Thanks for waiting, Kiyotaka-kun."

Airi scuttled towards the doctor's office wearing her uniform. She was holding the eco bag containing her wet clothes. Airi wore a white blouse but not a white skirt. Instead, she wore the skirt with an inverted color scheme; the red skirt with white lines. The combination made her look like she was wearing casual clothes. Well, the red skirt was almost exclusively used outside the school. I've never seen anyone wear it during school hours due to how it'd look with our already-red blazers.

"Ara, she's back. Head home now, you two. I'm sure it was tough getting trapped inside that elevator." The physician lady gave us her regards.

"Y-Yes, thank you very much, Sensei." Airi bowed with a slightly flustered face.

I also bowed without saying a word before returning the towel.

Airi and I finally walked towards the exit. The purchase was a success and we even managed to visit the fortune-teller. If it weren't for that unfortunate power outage, I would call this a fantastic day.

"Are you feeling alright now?" I asked.

"Yes, how about you?"

"I'm okay."

"Um, where's Haruka-chan?"

"She rushed out after receiving a message. She said it was very important so she had to go."

"Ohh, is that so?"

"Yep, Haruka asked me to tell you she said goodbye."

Airi smiled with an understanding nod. We exited Keyaki Mall without much issue. The time was 3:46 PM and the heat from the sun was still scorchingly high. Japanese summers really are to be dreaded. No wonder it felt like we were getting baked alive in there.

The way to the dorms had always been aesthetic. Each path was clean and architecturally pleasing to the eye. Streets had green verges separating the roads from the sidewalks which the school nicely maintains. Passing through the avenue from the shopping

district to the school was the boulevard that takes us to the forked pathway that splits the dorm buildings from each other.

"Kiyotaka-kun, did you know about that tree-lined spot behind the school building?" she suddenly asked.

"Hmm, is that the one where you'd have to go behind the water station area near the second gymnasium?"

"Yes, that one!"

"I think I've been there a couple of times. It's a pretty hidden spot."

"Do you want to take a detour?" she asked coyly.

"Hey... Didn't we just go through hell by attempting that?"

"I-It's fine! The fortune-teller said that we'd get stuck, right? Wouldn't that be impossible as long as it's we're in an open area?"

"I guess you have a point... But why do you wanna go there?"

"I'll tell you when we get there... Well, more like show you."

"Okay...? As long as there's no harm to it, I guess."

The two of us walked off from the boulevard and turned towards the school building. It's almost been a month since our summer vacation started. In a couple of days, the 2nd semester will finally be here. I'm sure Airi was having the same thought as we passed through the side of the building. Since I wasn't wearing my uniform, I can't really enter the front gate.

"We're here," I said.

"Let's stay under the shade," suggested Airi.

We were technically inside the school grounds, but there were lots of ways to leave or enter other than the front and back gates. The way this entire city-like campus was built made it possible due to how adjacent everything was to each other. Most of the infrastructure is only separated by trees or other types of greenery. Apart from the leisure pool, open courts, and some buildings, nothing was really enclosed by towering walls or tall fences.

Both of us were expert loners before we got used to having friends. Airi and I knew more than five ways to get in and out of the school grounds without getting detected.

"This might be a secret spot that people rarely go to, but it's still well-kept," I commented.

"The school maintains everything well, doesn't it?"

Airi observed the trees with a smile. Before we drift off to another topic, I decided to ask her about our purpose for taking another detour.

"So, why are we here?"

"Yes, um... You see..." She shyly removed her glasses before untying her hair. "I was thinking, Kiyotaka-kun... Maybe I could come to school without trying to hide my real appearance..."

Right now, the person in front of me was Sakura Airi. Her looks might've been that of Shizuku, the model, but she was undoubtedly still Airi.

"I'm still very shy-- even now... But thanks to you, Haruka-chan, Ken-kun, and Akito-kun, I think I've become stronger. We're in Class A now. If I don't stop hiding inside my shell, I might end up holding everyone back."

She'd seen how Karuizawa dismantled Yamauchi's attitude and status inside the class. Her name was even mentioned back then. Airi admits that her academic performance is among the worst, but unlike Ken, she couldn't make up for it with her poor athleticism. All she can do right now was study harder so as to not become a glaring liability.

However, if she could take advantage of her appearance and make more friends, then she could be a useful asset to the class, just like Kikyuu. The only thing holding her back was her own lack of social skills and self-confidence.

That might change very soon, though. Back then, Airi could only stay silent during our conversations, but she speaks her mind more frequently nowadays. She used to be scared of Ken, especially when he gets riled up, but now, she's been able to scold all three of us boys without shying away. Touching someone of the opposite sex makes Airi very uncomfortable, especially after her horrible experience. However, she can pleasantly make contact with us now. She tends to gently tap Ken's arm whenever she scolds him. There was also this one time when she enjoyingly pinched Akito's cheek. And she started growing a habit of caressing my hair whenever I'm beside her.

"I want to change-- both on the inside and the outside. I can't stay the way I am forever, at least not in this school where my incompetence can affect other people..." Airi blushed before looking up at me. "I wanted you to be the first one to see me, Kiyotaka-kun. You were the one who found me, after all."

Our first meeting back then was a coincidence at best. I never expected the two of us to be this close, and honestly, I welcome this outcome with a serene feeling in my chest.

"Airi, you're much more amazing than what you give yourself credit for."

"It's true that I want to be more useful to the class, but my motivations are much more selfish than you think, Kiyotaka-kun. I'm doing this for myself the most," she chuckled.

"And there's nothing wrong with that. I believe in you, and I'm sure the others are, as well." I glanced downwards before continuing. "But there's no need to rush things, you know?"

"Huh?"

"It'll be alright. If you want to change, you're free to do so at your own pace. You don't need to adjust to the class's progress."

I want to support Airi with everything I had. That's why I don't want her to self-destruct by doing something that she wouldn't be able to keep up with. She wasn't ready. Her trembling hands and teary eyes were enough evidence.

"As expected, I really can't hide anything from you," she smiled bitterly.

Airi tied her hair up again before putting on her glasses.

"Maybe... the reason why I wanted to talk to you about this... was that I wanted someone to decide for me..."

That self-deprecating smile was all too familiar for us in the Ayanokouji Group. Haruka wished she could make it disappear from Airi's face forever.

"I won't say that you're fine the way you are. That would be an insult to your resolve to change. But I'm sure that it's okay for you to stay that way a little longer. We're in Class A and I stepped down as the class leader, but Horikita and Hirata are there to shoulder my responsibilities. Most of our classmates are on board with helping, too. You don't need to worry about aiding the class the way they do-- at least not this soon."

"Mn, I understand," she smiled. "Thanks for hearing me out, Kiyotaka-kun."

"No problem. We're friends."

My understanding of Airi's worries goes beyond that of witnessing a friend fly up from their nest. After all, we're not that different, she and I.

I'm trying to change, too. If I can do that, then maybe I can live a truly peaceful life-- one that I can have away from that man.

"Kiyota-" Airi's words were cut off after a droplet of water landed on her nose.

The same happened on my cheek.

"It's raining," she said.

The sun is still high up but...

"Let's head back, Airi."

Despite our efforts to take cover as soon as possible, the rain immediately got intense. The two of us were soaked in an instant.

"It's still sunny... but why did it rain so suddenly?" she asked.

"A sunshower, most likely."

"Sunshower?"

"The clouds where this rain came should be kilometers away from us. But the wind carried the rainfall all the way here."

We were near the coast, so the clouds probably came from the

ocean area.

"Ehh... That's interesting."

"You okay?"

"Yes... But I might need to bring these back to the cleaners."

I didn't have the easiest time looking at Airi. Her drenched blouse made some things easier to see. However, I can't get flustered on my own here. This scenario might've been something that boys desired, but that's just a one-sided fantasy.

"Now that I think about it, the fortune-teller did tell you to be careful with downpours."

Airi flinched after recalling Ukon-sensei's words.

"I-I forgot..." she said before giggling. "Looks like we got involved in each other's misfortunes."

"Seems like it."

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 13.1 - A Glimpse of Normal Life

Three pools with three different functions. Extravagant would be an appropriate word to describe the facility. We decided to stay in the first pool which was a standard swimming pool. The second one functioned like a lazy river with a current while the third one focused on sports and other dynamic activities.

"Hey, Kiyotaka! Aren't you gonna swim?!" Ken yelled at me while waving his arm.

He and Akito were having fun inside the pool with Airi and Haruka. They wearing their swimming trunks but the girls, including me, wore rashguards.

"I'll be there soon," I replied.

As unfortunate as it was, I was tasked to take all of our things to our designated tent. It seems like today wasn't my luckiest day to play rock-paper-scissors.

"I wonder how many people came yesterday and the day before in comparison to this...?" The luxurious facility was still crowded even if it was the last day, and the number of people would only increase later on.

I've heard of stories from others, but this really felt like a festival in its own right. Since the pool facility wasn't part of the main school building, we've seen a lot of students wearing their casual clothes outside while eating snacks. When we entered the premises, lots of stalls selling food could be seen everywhere. From what I can see, they were being managed by upperclassmen.

Some of them looked very serious with their business while some just looked like they were having fun. It reminded me of our first special exam.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun!"

After finishing up, a familiar voice called out to me.

"Ichinose... and Horikita...?" I couldn't really hide the surprise in my tone.

"What?" she glared.

"Well, you're the last person I'd expect to see with Ichinose."

"Ahaha, I was the one who invited her. My friends are also here!" she answered.

"Don't get me wrong, Ayanokouji-kun. I only accepted her invite because of our deal from the Zodiac Exam."

Ahh, so it's about that, huh?

"You could've just come here with your casual clothes but..." I glanced at Horikita who was wearing a nice two-piece swimsuit with a frilled top and laced bottom.

"What are you looking at?"

"Your swimsuit. It looks good." Horikita probably didn't expect my response given her silence. I turned around and started walking away to avoid creating an awkward atmosphere. "I'm here with Ken and the others. You guys go have fun."

"Ohoho? Just casually escaping after that compliment? Aren't you a sneaky one, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Well, I didn't expect Ichinose to let me off the hook with that one.

"I appreciate your praise, but I was forced to wear this." Horikita finally responded, looking vexed.

"Hehe~, you can thank me for giving you the chance to see Horikita-san in a swimsuit!"

When I reached the edge of the pool, I stopped walking before turning around. Abruptly continuing the conversation would make Ichinose's provocative teasing a fact, so I started doing some stretches. That way, it would look like talking to them again was just a byproduct of what I wanted to do.

"I figured that you were the one responsible for it, but how did you convince Horikita?" I asked.

"With the power of sympathy baiting!" Ichinose boldly answered. "You see, I was originally going to wear my school swimsuit, but my friends told me it's a no-go. So, I begged Horikita-san to wear a stylish swimsuit with me!"

"You were being a little brat about it, so I had no choice but to go along with your whims. I wouldn't want to derail our meeting."

"Ehehe..." Ichinose giggled while clinging to Horikita. "Us aside, it seems like you're not wearing a typical swimsuit, Ayanokouji-kun."

Most of the guys wore swimming trunks but I saw a few others covering up like me.

"It might be strange for a guy, but I don't really like showing my skin to people. We heard it was okay as long as we weren't in class."

Ichinose peeked ahead and saw my friends playing in the water.

"Ohh, Sakura-san and Hasebe-san also wore rashguards, huh?" she smiled. "I think that's fine. 'Not like it's against the rules.'"

I finished stretching so I decided to leave them be.

"Well, you guys can go have fun. I'm gonna head back."

"Okay~! Let's hang out later, Ayanokouji-kun!" she waved.

The fact that she even managed to rope Horikita into her group

already says a lot about Ichinose's abilities in persuasion.

"Kiyopon!" Haruka and the others called for me as I approached them.

A couple of hours later...

"Oh, hey there!"

"Amikura-san... right?"

"Yep, and you're Hasebe-san, correct?"

"Yes..."

"Ohh, so you guys are Ayanokouji-kun's closest friends!"

"You're Sakura-san, right? Nice to meet you. I'm Kobashi. You can call me Yume if you want."

"Uh- Um..."

We were in the same pool, and the area where we played around wasn't too far from where Ichinose's group stayed. It was inevitable for our groups to eventually become adjacent to each other.

So apart from Ichinose and Horikita, there's Amikura, Kobashi, and Shiranami-- a group of five girls. They must've been the *initial* bunch because from what I can see, some more Class C students joined them later on.

"Hey, Sudou, how are ya?"

"Oh, Shibata. Wanna have a swimming race?"

"You're on!"

"Don't get too excited now. You might bother other students," scolded Kanzaki.

The sporty guys seemed to know each other and were told off by the serious Kanzaki. Meanwhile, Akito was chatting with Beppu.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun!" Ichinose called for me from the poolside. Horikita was also beside her.

I sat beside them-- just near enough to hold a conversation.

"Heya~! Are we bothering you guys?"

"No, not at all."

While I do think we're the type to hang out with those we're familiar with, meeting new people shouldn't be too bad.

Ichinose was probably concerned after seeing how on-guard Haruka was along with Airi's reserved attitude. She didn't need to worry about anything, though. They were both fighting their own (social) battles, especially Airi.

"So, did you guys finish up with your discussion?" I asked, changing the topic.

"Yep! The one and half million are now all yours!" Only someone like Ichinose would be able to utter those words with a genuine

smile.

"Honami-chan!" Shiranami called out to her with a wave. "Can you come here for a sec'?"

"Okay, I'll be there!" She looked at us, smiling bitterly. "I'll leave you two for now."

Ichinose entered the pool and made her way to her friends.

"How was it?" I asked.

"The transaction?"

"Everything. The transaction, making friends, having fun, and all that jazz."

"Hmm... It's so-so, I guess..." she answered.

If it was the old Horikita, she'd probably try to play dumb saying *"I don't know what you're talking about."* or something.

"This seems like a huge leap, though. You may be friends with Mori or Makida, but it's not like you're already as comfortable with them as you are with me or Hirata. So it's certainly a big step up for you to go so far as to socialize with a bunch of girls from a different class."

"I was just taking the opportunity. I'm the class leader now, so making connections is necessary. And it's not like everything went perfectly. They were friendly and welcoming, yes. But based on how they're trying to adjust, I think they're a bit intimidated or put off by me."

"I don't think *"put off"* is the right term for it, but that goes without saying. They're not used to being around someone like you, especially since their home ground is Class C."

It's probably safe to say that I'm friends with Amikura and Kobashi. Shiranami might not like me too much, but I've talked to her before, as well. They're not the type to judge based on initial impressions. Or at least, that's what they've shown me so far. And I'm pretty sure they'd be influenced by Ichinose who seems to like Horikita a lot.

Not to mention that our classes are supposed to be allies.

"To be honest, I wanted to invite Hirata-kun as a co-leader, but considering the location, it'd bring about some problems."

Hirata had a girlfriend, namely; Karuizawa. Horikita was the leader of the class while Karuizawa was the leader of the girls. If word got out that Horikita and Hirata went to the pool during summer, rumors and misunderstandings will surely pop up.

Knowing Karuizawa, I don't think she would personally mind. She knew about Hirata's role as a fellow class leader. But a high school campus is like a lake infested with piranhas. Girls and even boys would gladly take a bite out of any potential scandal, especially when famous people are involved.

"It's fine. You can just tell everything to Hirata tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, huh? Speaking of which, the second semester is finally starting..."

"It's been over five months since the entrance ceremony. I've been so busy being the leader that I almost forgot, but this school is incredibly unique. I wonder what the second semester has in store for us apart from the typical school stuff?"

"Yeah. Surviving on a deserted island and playing a social deduction game... What other school would consider *those* as exams?"

"Well, at least we still get to experience a normal high school life when there's nothing crazy going on..." I said.

"A normal high school life, is it? That's your main reason for stepping down, right? But you wouldn't have led the class in the first place if you didn't try to test yourself."

"That's true. I'm done doing that, though. We've already reached Class A."

I guess taking that risk on the first day really paid off in the long term. I can only imagine our current situation if the class's ignorance wasn't taken care of back in April.

"You've beaten both Ryuuen-kun and Katsuragi-kun, but what about the student called Sakayanagi? Aren't you curious about her?"

"I'd be lying if I say I wasn't... but I guess I'll just have to find out how good she is by seeing you go up against her."

And I couldn't really say that I've "*beaten*" Ryuuen and Katsuragi. The school year had just gotten started, after all.

"In your honest opinion, Ayanokouji-kun... Do you think I can face them and end up victorious?"

Now, this was a prime example of the Dunning-Kruger Effect. When she enrolled here and saw how incompetent most of her classmates were, Horikita was at the height of her arrogance. It was understandable since she had excellent grades and athletic abilities. However, I kept her around me. That's when Horikita finally realized that she was nothing but a frog at the bottom of a well.

She's starting to mature, but whether her growth can keep up with the upcoming battles is unknown.

Horikita probably holds a similar kind of respect for me as she does with her brother. That's why my opinion would very much count. Since she asked for it, then I'll give her my honest evaluation.

"I'll be frank. As the way you are now, you can't really defeat Ryuuen or Katsuragi-- not even Ichinose. In fact, you're so behind that I don't think you're even competing on the same battlefield."

Her eyes trembled in shock, but she took my bluntness head-on.

"Can you tell me why you think that?"

"I can give you an insight into why you're a couple of levels below them. Think of this school as a big picture. Ryuuken and the others can see bits of it, like a jigsaw puzzle. It's severely incomplete, but they're on their way to collect the missing pieces. Meanwhile, you're too focused on the pieces you have in hand. So much so that you think that those few pieces are everything you need."

"I see... I think I can see where you're coming from..." Horikita went deep in thought.

"Sorry for being vague, but it's not like I can say anything concrete."

"It's okay. I think what you've said is very helpful. I'll take it to heart."

I didn't really expect such a gentle and understanding response from her.

I thought about what Onizuka and the other guys would say if they were here with me. After all, it was another rare occasion... where I get to see Horikita Suzune's smile.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 13.2 - Something to Prove

"Woah!"

"Kyah~!"

We heard some noises from the other end of the facility. Was something happening by the third pool?

"They're gettin' fired up with somethin'?"

"Seems like something's happening in that other pool."

"That's the sports pool, right? Maybe there's a game being played by someone popular?"

"The sport that's bein' played the most should be volleyball. And based on the interval of their cheerin' times, it should be the case."

"You sure, Kencchin?"

"I'm 90% sure."

"Ken-kun's really smart when it comes to sports."

"Hah-? So yer sayin' I'm dumb when it comes to things that *aren't* sports?!" Ken was in dismay after hearing Airi's words.

How did you even reach that interpretation before taking it as a compliment first...?

"Isn't that obvious? You're dumber than the dumb ones in our class!" Haruka crossed her arms while raising an eyebrow. Her breast rested beautifully on her forearms. "Hmm... But these days, you *are* getting quite smarter-- I should at least admit that."

"Then yer just talkin' about academics! I can be smart about tons of other stuff too, ya know?!"

"Hey man, you're getting too fired up. Don't just let Haruka lead you around the nose with her teasing."

"Ah-! Damn it..."

I stared at my friends' typical banters before Ichinose spoke up beside me.

"I remember lots of 2nd-year students around that place."

"2nd-years, huh?"

"Are you curious, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked with a probing smile.

"I'd be lying if I say I'm not."

"Let's check it out, then!" Ichinose stood up and faced our considerably large group. "Guys, let's go see what's so fun over

there!"

Ichinose's charisma somehow just gets a certain agreeable response from anyone she gets along with. We would either be enthusiastic about her whims or just go with the flow. No one antagonizes her even if she didn't impose authority like Karuizawa or intimidation like Ryuen. She was someone that you just want to follow.

"Kyah~!"

"Woohoo!"

"Amazing~!"

The uproar grew increasingly louder. It seems like the game was getting intense.

Splash

The ball was spiked towards the other side of the court, and the screams of the girls surrounding the pool followed right after. The game was intense, but it was not like a team battle of six-versus-six was happening. One male student heavily stood out.

"That's guy's awesome..." muttered Ken.

If he, of all people, says that, then it must be true.

The guy's blonde hair swayed with each of his movements. Some of the players looked tired while some looked fired up. Contrasting them was his composed expression which made him very eye-catching.

The next round started and he easily caught the serve. The setter didn't even need to move as the ball perfectly bounced on top of him. With an optimal set from an optimal receive, the blonde-haired male student jumped off at the perfect time and spiked a bullet into the enemy court. It wasn't like he was the only good player, though. A student from the opposing team was able to react to his attack but unfortunately failed to bring the ball up.

The cheering ensued as soon as the ball made contact with the water. I didn't recognize anyone from the crowd, so it's safe to assume that most of them are 2nd-year girls with some 3rd-years in the mix. He's really popular in his year.

"That guy's pretty good. Do you think you can beat him, Kiyotaka?" Akito asked, nudging my left side.

Ichinose looked over with a curious smile. Horikita and the other girls did as well. It didn't take long until Airi and Haruka along with the other Class C boys also looked at me.

"No way. I don't even know how to play volleyball."

"You're so humble, Kiyopon~." Haruka nudged my other side with a smirk.

The girls from Class C suddenly muttered to themselves. I couldn't exactly understand what they were mumbling about, but I heard the

word "Kiyopon" in there.

"Hey, the poolside court is free now! Do you guys wanna play?!" yelled Shibata with Ken waving his arms beside him.

"Let everyone do some warm-ups first, Shibata. It'd be bad if someone gets injured," said Kanzaki.

"Honami-chan, let's go!"

"I'll be there in a bit, Chihiro-chan." Ichinose subtly waved her hands with an apologetic expression.

I stayed beside her and continued watching the ongoing game. Ichinose stood on my left while Horikita was on my right. I wonder if she was also curious about that guy.

"Do you two know him?" Ichinose broke the silence with that question.

"No, not really..." I glanced at Horikita who also shook her head.

"That's Nagumo-senpai from Class 2-A," she said.

"Nagumo..." I muttered.

Now that's a familiar name. I've had Kikyou tell me some things about him, but this was the first time I've seen his appearance. He does look like a high-spec individual.

Ichinose's gaze stayed ahead as she continued.

"He's the current vice president of the student council, and that's on top of his abilities." Hearing that, Horikita's shoulders tightened slightly. "It looks like he's quite popular with the girls which kinda makes sense, now that I look at it."

Well, we can certainly see that. The pool was gigantic so there were other games being played both in and on the side, but no one else's game was being watched aside from this one. Everyone was fixated on Nagumo.

"Even though he's popular with the ladies, I've never heard of him until now. You don't know him either, right, Ayanokouji-kun? Wouldn't it be safe to assume that his popularity is inferior to that of the student council president?"

Hey, hey, aren't you just picking a fight here?

"I guess so. Everyone knows the student council president, after all. He even made a very big impression on us freshmen during the after-school club recruitment back in April."

Instead of trying to immediately one-up Horikita who tried to oppose her, Ichinose just supported her words with a smile. However, it wasn't like she'd sell him short.

"But according to some rumors, Nagumo-senpai has comparable skills. I don't really know how credible those rumors are, but some events from the past brought them on. Did you know that Nagumo-senpai and Horikita-senpai both ran for the position of president last year? He was just a freshman during that time, but he was bold

enough to run against a 2nd-year Class A student."

"You're quite well-informed, aren't you, Ichinose-san?"

"Ahaha, I wouldn't say that. I guess joining the student council comes with picking up on those kinds of information."

"Oh right, you *are* part of the student council now." I finally found a chance to enter the conversation. I felt like a war was brewing and I didn't want to be in the middle of it.

Horikita was surprised by that sudden revelation.

"You knew about it, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Ichinose.

"Yeah, by coincidence." I glanced at Horikita before continuing. "Are there any prerequisites for joining the student council? Not just anyone could join, right?"

I could feel Horikita's glare on my back. It was pretty shameless to lie about being ignorant after I was offered the position of vice president, but I needed to be on guard. I can't have Ichinose know about my relationship with the student council president just yet.

"Hmm... To be honest, I'm not too sure myself. Apart from the necessary application requirements, the president hadn't really made anything clear." Ichinose scratched her cheek while smiling bitterly. "I was actually rejected more than once. I persisted, and I was luckily accepted just recently."

"I'm surprised that it worked." Horikita knew her brother more than anyone. She knew that Ichinose's perseverance wouldn't move him. Even an excellent student like Katsuragi was coldly refused.

"Apparently, the final decision came from Nagumo-senpai who used his authority as the vice president. Two 1st-year students are usually accepted into the student council, but according to Nagumo-senpai, President Horikita seemed disappointed in this year's freshmen."

Horikita's eyebrows furrowed ever so slightly after hearing that.

"Ah, now that I think about it, you and the president have the same last names, Horikita-san. Are you related?"

"Well..." Horikita hesitated for a moment before answering. "I'm his little sister."

"Ohh, I knew it! It kinda makes sense, though. I'm not that close to the president, but I guess the two of you are quite similar."

It's not like her assumption was a stretch. There were only about 350 people in the whole world who bear the same last name.

"I see..."

Seeing Horikita's discomfort, I decided to veer the conversation back on topic.

"Nagumo-senpai was originally from Class B, right? But now he's in Class A. It's pretty weird coming from me, but that's amazing."

"Ahaha! Yeah, you guys are much more amazing. You went from

Class D to Class A in a span of a semester and set a record that probably won't get surpassed by anyone," giggled Ichinose. "But speaking of records, every student council president in the history of this school came from Class A. Nagumo-senpai came from Class B, but before anyone realized it, he was next in line to become president."

"You really look up to him," I said.

"We get along quite well. I feel like I can relate to him a lot. It seems like President Horikita is stepping down this October, though... So I want to hurry up and prove myself. And then I'm going to become president after Nagumo-senpai." Ichinose paused for a moment before facing us with a grin. "Just kidding!"

She hummed while skipping toward the rest of the group who were raring to go and play.

"Let's go."

After Kanzaki and others managed to get permission, they finally relayed the rules to us. We'll be playing a first-to-two (set) game with each one capping at 15 points unless a deuce happens.

"I'll sit this one out, Honami-chan. I'm already tired from playing around earlier," said Shiranami.

"No problem, Chihiro-chan! Ah, please buy some drinks for us then, once you're done resting."

"Okay, sure!"

Since they had an extra person, it became a perfect six-versus-six match.

"Don't look so scared, Airi. It's just a friendly game. And with Kiyopon and Ken on our team, we probably won't even need to move."

"B-But... I'm not athletic and I don't really know how to play volleyball... And after seeing the spikes from earlier, I can't help but get terrified. My arms might get t-torn off, you know?"

"Well... I'm sure it's not that bad..."

On our side of the court were me, Horikita, Ken, Akito, Haruka, and Airi. On the other side were Ichinose, Amikura, Kobashi, Kanzaki, Shibata, and Beppu. It was basically a full-on class battle.

"Do you want to make bets, Horikita-san?" smirked Ichinose.

"Sure," Horikita responded with confidence.

"Alright. The losers will pay for the winners' lunch. How's that for the stakes."

"Is that fine for all of you?" Horikita asked as she faced us.

All of us nodded without much hesitation.

"Then it's set. Let's have a good game, Horikita-san."

Ichinose offered to shake hands and Horikita accepted.

"If we're going to do this, then let's win," she said.

"You're fired up about this, Horikita-san," mused Haruka.

"Well, we have lots of private points, so it's not like losing is a problem in that aspect. But given how our teams were formed, it's still a match between two classes. We can't just back down from that challenge, can we? Especially since we're just about to debut as the new Class A."

"Hehe, I like your style, Horikita. Alright, leave it to me. As long as I'm here, those meatheads won't stand a chance." Ken punched his fists together.

"Wouldn't the term '*meathead*' describe you, though?" Akito tilted his head in confusion.

"Hah? The hell are you sayin', Akito? Doesn't '*meathead*' refer to someone who's got too much meat in their head? Like their brain is too big because they study too much. Right?"

Airi smiled bitterly while Akito and Haruka shook their heads in distress. That was quite the misunderstanding.

"Do you have any experience with volleyball, Sudou-kun?" Horikita magnificently ignored the current topic and asked.

"Nope. Played a little in class, though."

"And yet you sound really confident."

"Basketball's like all other sports. An upperclassman I respect said that."

While that saying doesn't necessarily hold true in a technical sense, I can get where Ken was coming from. He wasn't a competitive swimmer, yet he showed stellar results in class. It was the same with other sports. As long as he gets the basics, he'll use his overwhelming athletic abilities to defeat his opponents. In other words, he busts through with sheer brute force.

"Alright. Let's see what you got."

Horikita knew that I didn't want any unnecessary attention, so she didn't even bother asking me about *my* volleyball skills (which were nonexistent). I can't help but thank her in my mind.

Author's Notes:

Now that Suzune is in Class A, she can honestly answer questions regarding her relationship with Manabu as his little sister.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 13.3 - Class A Versus Class C

The whistle blows, indicating the start of our game. After winning the coin toss, Class C gets to serve first.

"I got it," said Haruka.

After an acceptable receive, Horikita ran after the ball and set it up for an attack.

"Sudou-kun!" she called.

"Here. We. Go-!" And slam.

Kanzaki jumped to block him and Shibata tried to dive for the ball, but it was too fast. The first point goes to us.

"Hell yeah! Did you guys see that?!" he yelled.

"Woohoo! That was amazing, right Airi?!" Haruka excitedly celebrated.

"Y-Yes!" Airi kept her eyes on the spot where the ball landed with a slightly terrified expression.

"It's nice to chill in the corner, right, Kiyotaka?" Akito smirked at me from the other side of the court.

"I know right," I replied with a smug tone.

"That was a bomb of a spike, Sudou!" said Shibata. "We'll definitely get you back for that."

"Heh, try me if you can!"

"The boys are getting fired up now," Amikura commented.

"Phew, that was intense! But things are just getting started, you know?" added Ichinose.

Horikita delivered a solid jump serve when the second whistle was blown, but Ichinose was nimble enough to receive it. Beppu got into position and set it up.

"Wha-?" Ken's expression tightened.

Amikura ran towards the center while Kanzaki and Shibata ran from both sides. Ken and Akito were at a loss with whom to block. They decided too late after seeing Beppu set it up from the back for Shibata, their outside hitter. Both of our blockers managed to jump, but they could only block a cross from that angle. In the end, Shibata spiked a straight... which directly flew towards me.

"Woah-!"

With no volleyball skills, I only managed to hit the ball with my

wrist from a sloppy angle and it got blown away to the side.

"Our bluff worked!" Ichinose, Amikura, and Kobashi high-fived each other while the boys pumped their fists.

"Goddamn... They saw through our read," grumbled Ken.

"Their bluff? What does that mean?" asked Haruka.

"I'm originally in the back-right position, but I switched with Ayanokouji-kun, who's in the middle-back, after my serve to support Sakura-san, who's in the back-left. Our blockers were ready to stop an attack from Kanzaki-kun, their right-side hitter, because Sakura-san will be forced to receive it," explained Horikita.

(Note: The opponents' right side is their left side. So the enemy right-side hitter attacks Airi, who was guarding their left side. Haruka was guarding the center in case of a dump.)

"But they went for Kiyopon instead of Airi, right?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"I'm sorry for being a liability," Airi bowed apologetically.

"You did nothing wrong, Sakura-san. We actually had the advantage when it comes to defense because we would predict that they'd target you..." Horikita narrowed her eyes while looking at Ichinose. "It seems like they were one step ahead of us this time."

"My bad. I couldn't receive it," I apologized.

"It's alright, Ayanokouji-kun. That was a sharp straight. Since you don't really have any experience with volleyball, it was the inevitable outcome..." She gave me a side glance before continuing with a whisper. "But I know you can keep up with any of us once you get used to it. You can hold back if you want, but please don't throw the game at the very least."

"Okay..." I nodded slightly.

"Let's take it back, Horikita!" cried Ken.

"Alright," she replied.

Time passed by and the game got heated more and more. Points were being exchanged left and right. Strategies were being formed on the spot and all of them are being improved upon once countered. It wasn't like this was a high-level game or anything. But Ken's insane athleticism covered us a lot. As long we could get the ball up, he'll be there to send it back. Horikita would occasionally attack, too. Ken and Horikita made all of the calls for our team.

The whistle blew and the first set was won by Class A with a score of 16 to 14 points.

"Hell yeah!"

"Woohoo, we did it!"

Horikita still had her poker face, but she sighed with a satisfied expression.

"Ahh, we were so close!"

"It's alright, everyone. We'll take it back on the next set."

The referee, who was also the scorer and the lineman, approached Kanzaki. Since this wasn't an official game or anything, we can decide how long our breaks between sets will be-- in consideration of it not being too long, of course. We'll just have to call him back once we're ready to go again.

"The referee is a 2nd-year student, right?" I turned to my friends.

"Hm? Yeah, I think so. I don't know his name, but I'm pretty sure I've seen him around." Haruka answered with a shrug.

"The second-years are taking jobs during these last three days around the pool, from food stalls to general services like this one. I heard about it from one of my seniors during a club meeting. Maybe it's exclusive for the second-years or something."

"I see..." I wonder if we'll also be asked to do something like this next year.

"Are you guys ready?!" Ichinose smilingly waved at us.

"Yeah, let's do this."

After finishing the drinks that Shiranami bought for everyone, the match finally continued.

Unsurprisingly, that's when things started slowing down for us.

"Ahh... Gahh... Damn it..." Ken was finally showing signs of exhaustion.

It was the best strategy for Class C. Making Ken chase the ball over and over would inevitably tire him out.

"We need to close it out in this set. Sudou-kun won't last until then," said Horikita.

The score was 11 to 13 points, in favor of us. Just a little longer and we can finally have our free lunch, but Ken was just about to run out of steam.

"We'll have to step it up, Kiyotaka," said Akito.

"I've been trying my best the whole time, though. I don't how I can step it up even further."

"Really? You're incredibly athletic, right? Then maybe you're just bad at volleyball in particular?" he mused.

"Any ball game except for dodgeball. That one doesn't really require much technical knowledge and skill unless you're playing on a high level."

"I guess so..." Akito smirked at me once again before chuckling. "I really thought you were about to pop off when you tried to do a jump serve earlier."

"And fumbled badly."

"It's one of the rare times where you looked uncool."

"You don't have to rub it in..."

Ken and Horikita were doing those amazing serves. Ichinose,

Kanzaki, and Shibata also managed to do it. I was satisfied with doing mediocre overhead serves, but my curiosity got the best of me. After studying their movements, I figured that I wanted to try and do a jump serve, too.

My release and initial motions were good, but after seeing Kanzaki and Ichinose scrutinize me from the other side of the net, I decided to swing without much control. In the end, the ball went outside and I gave away a point. Ken also yelled at me for doing so.

"I mean, it's all good. It's not like you're a volleyball expert or anything," said Akito.

"That's true." The jump serve was the most advanced serve in volleyball. No one would be able to do it perfectly for the first time.

The referee approached the Shiranami who sat by the scoreboard. Since the referee also had the duty of a lineman, he was usually around the edges of the court to confirm some points. However, it seems like he had to go to the restroom for a bit.

After my brief talk with Akito, Shiranami got ready to pitch in for the referee. When she blew the spare unused whistle that the referee provided for her, Airi tried to serve the ball only to fail.

"I'm sorry..."

"It's alright, Airi. Them serving means we get to attack." Ken comforted her with a confident grin.

Airi did a great job holding on this whole time. Despite being a liability, she didn't really get in anyone's way. She'd give away a few points here and there, but with Horikita and Ken covering for her, it didn't really matter too much.

Also, her success rate in serving was 40% so far, meaning she got two out of five serves on the other side of the court. They might not be service aces or anything, but it's still amazing for an absolute beginner like her.

The whistle blows and the ball was served by Shibata. He ran up and threw the ball up in the air. After a swift jump and spiking motion, the ball got launched in a beautifully straight line. Sadly for him, his serve got caught in the net.

"Ahh! Sorry about that!" he cried.

"Hey, Sou, you idiot! What if you hit me on the head?!" scolded Beppu.

"That would've been hilarious!" replied Shibata.

Shiranami blew the whistle and now we were on match point. In a twist of fate, I was the one who'll serve next.

I muttered softly, but loud enough for the person in front of me to hear.

"You're in luck, Horikita. I'm hungry, so I wanna finish this now."

Surprised by my words, she turned around with a slightly tensed-

up expression.

Seeing me in the far back, Ken immediately knew that I was going for a jump serve once again.

"Hey, Kiyotaka! You better take this home or I'll clobber you!"

I ignored him and focused forward. Based on what I observed earlier, I need to jump a bit higher if I wanted to exert more power. That's probably what Shibata tried to do. If he pulled it off, I doubt our backline could receive his serve.

I gently tossed the ball upward and followed up with a running jump.

Alright, let's get this over with.

****Bam****

The sound of my hand hitting the ball and the sound of the ball hitting the floor didn't even take half a second to happen in succession. There wasn't any way for Amikura and Kanzaki to react. I also managed to serve the ball directly in between them, so they'd both hesitate even if they *did* try to get it.

No matter what happened, me scoring that point was already set in stone.

Author's notes:

Yes, Kiyotaka did Oikawa's diabolical serve.

Vol. 4.5: Chapter 13.4 - Last Day of Summer

The 2-second silence felt like forever. I stared at Shiranami who was also in a daze. Of course, it didn't take too long before she finally realized what happened.

Fweeeet

She blew the whistle and changed our score to 15, marking our win. It was also at that moment that the referee got back from the restroom.

"Hell yeah!" Ken was the first one who celebrated our victory.

"What the heck was that...?" Akito had to do a double-take to confirm what he saw.

"K-Kiyopon..." Haruka was also at a loss for words.

"Awawawawa..." Meanwhile, Airi was trembling beside me.

Horikita was also in a state of shock, but she recovered much faster than everyone else before shaking her head with a sigh.

"Ayanokouji! That was insane!" Shibata yelled at me from the enemy court.

"H-Honami-chan..." Amikura staggered before leaning her body onto Ichinose. "I... I thought I was gonna die!"

"Ahaha, yeah, that was such a strong serve!" Ichinose was seriously staring at the area where I served the ball, but she instantly went back to her normal self when Amikura approached her.

Kobashi patted Amikura's head while Kanzaki gave me an eyeful.

"How about that?! Free lunch for us, baby!" Ken basked in our victory despite looking really exhausted a minute ago.

"Aww, we lost!" Ichinose looked frustrated but was still all smiles. "Alright, everyone! Lunch is on me. Don't hold back and get anything you want."

"You sure? I'm a big eater, you know?" asked Ken.

"Of course! I was the one who suggested the whole thing, anyway." Ichinose gave us a thumbs up. "I know you guys are super rich right now, but I'm not poor either! I can treat everyone without a problem."

"What are you saying, Ichinose? Don't tell me you're paying for the whole thing?" asked Kanzaki.

"Yep! You guys go eat, too. Everything's on me."

"Well, you *are* pretty frugal. I suppose going on a food spree today wouldn't do much," said Shibata.

The other girls didn't really have anything to say. If Ichinose wanted to treat them, it's impossible to change her mind. They accepted her generosity with a smile.

"Didn't you spend lots of points on things like swimwear, though? Not to mention summer clothes..." Haruka tilted her head while asking.

"Oh, right. Well, this was probably my only notable purchase," she replied, looking at her swimsuit. "I don't really think much about fashion. I kinda wear whatever's there since I can just rotate my outfits. Though I guess that's pretty weird coming from a girl."

"Not at all. I'm actually impressed that you have that mindset while still looking pretty most of the time. I think it's good to not spend a lot, right, Airi?"

"Y-Yes... I think Ichinose-san is amazing in that regard."

"Well, isn't Honami just amazing in everything, though?" Amikura clung to her from behind.

Shiranami nodded furiously.

"Oh stop it, you guys. I don't really like spending a lot, you see. And that goes double in this school. There might be something more important for me to use points on in the future. Who knows?" she chuckled.

"Well then, thank you in advance, Ichinose-san." Horikita walked away towards the food stalls.

"Thank you, as well, Ichinose-san!" followed Haruka.

Airi bowed beside her before they turned around to go eat.

"In that case, I won't be holding back! Let's go, Kiyotaka, Akito!"

I was also interested in junk food, so I chose what I wanted to eat. And just like that, all of us decided to have our lunch in peace.

September 4th, 4:35 PM.

Taking Ichinose's suggestion, our not-so-little group decided to head out a bit earlier before the crowd gets worse. The closing time was 5:30 PM, so 5:00 PM onwards would be hell if we wanted to change since the locker rooms would be packed.

"Ahh man, my body's sore," Akito grumbled as he put on his shirt.

"Same, dude. That volleyball match was something else. In hindsight, I'm glad it ended on the 2nd set. I'd be dead before we could even finish the game," said Beppu.

"Well, with no timeouts and substitutions, we're bound to get

ourselves exhausted, even if every set ends only with 15 points. Both sets were close fights and we've been playing in the pool for a couple of hours by then, too."

We nodded at Kanzaki's logical explanation.

"Someone saved their strength at the last minute, though." Shibata leered at me with a smirk.

"Heh, I knew Kiyotaka was just playin' around at first."

"Dude... I thought you were bad at volleyball. I feel betrayed now."

"I *am* bad. That was my first-ever volleyball game apart from the ones we had in PE. You could say that my last point was a fluke-- a winning fluke. Man, I sure am lucky."

"That's such a grand coincidence, don't you think?" mused Beppu.

"Coincidences can be freaky."

"I thought it was only a matter of time, though. It's Kiyotaka, after all," shrugged Ken.

"Some of the guys in our class are in the basketball club, too. They say that Sudou is the most amazing athlete in our year. The fact that he praises you like this says a lot, Ayanokouji!"

"It's just some friendly bias. Ken always tends to overhype me."

"You're really something else, aren't you, Ayanokouji? With how intelligent and athletic you are, I'm sure you could continue leading Class A without a problem. Why'd you step down?" asked Kanzaki.

"It's nothing special. I got tired so I dipped out. I think I've done enough for the class. I just want to live peacefully from now on."

"So you're not going to help your class from here on out?"

"I'd at least do the bare minimum. Horikita and Hirata can handle the heavy lifting. I'm just an ordinary member of the class now."

"Well, you're certainly taking it easy now. Your exams and quizzes are starting to decline, you know?" said Akito.

"They're still above 80. I think that's good."

"I wish you'd relax with *my* studies, though," Ken complained.

"You know I can't do that. You have the attention span of a 12-year-old. And while I can slack off with *my* studies, I can't possibly neglect you guys."

"Ayanokouji's tutoring you, too, Miyake?" asked Shibata.

"Something like that. It was our way to get past the midterms back then. That's how our little group was formed, too." Akito explained as a matter of factly.

"Our class had a similar idea."

"You guys look like honor students, though."

"Katsuragi's class is the one with honor students. We have idiots like Shibata."

"Hey."

"If we're talking about idiots, we're probably even worse than Ryuuen's class. If the rankings were based on pure academic performance, then we really deserve Class D," said Akito.

"You can't call Shibata an idiot when *I'm* here," followed Ken.

"Don't be proud about it..." I retorted.

The six of us exited the boys' locker room and stood by the walkway towards the boulevard.

"Sorry for the wait!"

We didn't need to wait so much before the girls arrived. Something was weird with their atmosphere, though-- well, *someone's* atmosphere in particular.

"Heya, everyone! Should we go back, or is there anywhere else you wanna go to?" asked Ichinose.

"I'm done for the day. I'll be heading back to the dorms now," replied Kanzaki.

All of the guys seemed to share the same sentiment. Because of that, all of us decided to go back as one group.

Everyone seemed to be engaged in some sort of conversation and I somehow got left out of the loop. They started to slowly walk forward leaving me and Haruka behind a bit.

"You good?" I asked.

"Eh, ah-- Mn, yeah..." she nodded timidly.

Did something happen when they were inside the girls' locker room? Haruka would usually be the one who'd vibe the most of Ichinose especially since they've become a lot closer than before. Her current behavior was kind of strange, to say the least.

"Say, Kiyopon..."

"Hm?"

"Well, you see..."

Haruka looked like she was desperately fumbling for the right words. I gave her all the time she needed. Of course, it didn't take long before she lit up again.

"Ah, right! Airi told me that you two went to the fortune-teller yesterday!"

"Ohh, yeah. We still had some time to spare. It ended in a disaster, though. I'm glad we were able to contact you."

"It must've been hard for Airi..."

"What about me?"

"Oh, you'll be fine. It's you, after all." Haruka dismissed my protest.

For some reason, I'm not being treated like a normal human being.

"So is that all you wanted to tell me?"

"Well, something related to that. You see, I also wanna hang out

with you. Just the two of us." Haruka made it sound casual, but her cheeks were getting really flushed.

"Okay...?" My tone was dubious which made her panic.

"Just so you know, I don't mean anything by it, okay? You can call it a date, a hangout, or whatever, but it's not what you think! It's just-"

"Alright, alright, I get it. Stop making a fuss..."

I turned to the main group before glancing back at Haruka. They were looking at us with wondering expressions. Ichinose was smirking, though.

"Hey! You guys okay over there?" she waved.

They were a few meters ahead of us so Ichinose had to raise her voice.

"Yes, we're good! Kiyopon was just saying some nonsense!"

"I wasn't, though."

Haruka grabbed my arm as she ran towards everyone, dragging me along.

"On second thought, let's take a detour. Anyone wanna grab some ice cream at the convenience store?"

"Ohh, nice idea, Hasebe-san. Let's do it!"

Everyone agreed without much debate. It was almost five o'clock. After playing around from morning to afternoon, all of us were bound to get tired. A small refresher is always welcome.

After arriving, everyone rushed to get their ice cream. I managed to quickly grab what I like so I had the luxury to wait for them. Akito and Haruka looked like they were arguing about what to get while Ken was trying to calm a panicking and indecisive Airi. Kanzaki was trying to scold the rowdy Shibata and Beppu while the Class C girls were chatting with Horikita about the flavors.

"Did you have fun today?" Ichinose nudged me from the side. It seems like she was done choosing hers, too.

"Yeah, I did. I had lots of fun." Despite my monotonous delivery, I gave her a genuine answer.

"I see." Ichinose walked towards the register and I followed suit.

We munched on our ice cream after paying and stepped out of the store.

"The day after tomorrow... will be the start of a new semester," she said.

"Yeah."

"We'll be rivals once again."

"I'm just a typical member of the class now-- not a leader or anything. If you're talking about being rivals as leaders, then I'm no longer qualified to receive your words."

"Ahaha, I guess so... You talked to me about that quite a while

ago. To be honest, I really wanted to surpass you, Ayanokouji-kun-- to beat you, fair and square. I think I'm doing alright as Class C's leader, but I want to get results as you do."

"I'm sure you guys can do it. If I'm being honest, a lot of luck was involved in my successes. And I couldn't have done it alone. Horikita and the others were a huge part of why we're Class A now. I don't think you need to beat *me*, specifically."

"You're still terribly humble."

"I'm just telling the truth."

I was met with her usual bright smile followed by an adorable chuckle.

Our friends finally finished purchasing their cold treats. My conversation with Ichinose ended, as well. We walked towards the dorms while watching the sun set much later.

"This is great... as always..." I said quietly.

This soft-serve ice cream never disappoints me in terms of the overall experience. It's delicious and refreshing, and it keeps me wanting more. But as much as I like it, I can't eat too much.

"Whoa, you sure are enjoying that. It's almost like it's your first time eating one," observed Ichinose.

"I don't think I'm alone in having my reaction, especially in this heat," I replied like I was stating the obvious.

"I suppose, but you seem to *really* like it. I've never seen you make a face like that."

Like what...?

"That's because he has a face like a doll. His expression never changes," said Horikita, interjecting on my behalf.

"You're one to talk."

"I guess we're a bit similar in that sense."

I bit back, but Horikita chose to compromise.

"Kiyotaka-kun made the same face when he ate one for the first time." Airi came in at the perfect time. Her words didn't assist me in any way, though...

"Ehhh, really?"

"So you're an ice cream lover."

"No... Not really..."

And just like that, I became the topic of our conversation-- for some time, at least.

It didn't take long before we said our goodbyes. My group and Ichinose's classmates seemed satisfied with how their vacations went. Whatever our plans are for tomorrow, this was personally the last day of summer for me. When Monday comes, we'll be seeing each other wearing our school uniforms once again.

Author's Notes:

The pool chapters happened on the 'third' and last day of the pool's public access in the Light Novel, which was the day before the 2nd semester started. Kiyotaka and his group went on the 'second' day. This should mean that Honami and the others shouldn't have met them, but Horikita's desire to meet with her (regarding the points) influenced their schedule. Consequently, rather than joining Honami's group by chance like in the Light Novel, Kanzaki and the other Class C guys were invited by her instead.

This is the last chapter of Volume 4.5. Thanks for the wait!

SS.23 - Ayanokouji Kiyotaka Fans (5)

Date: September 5th

Time: 7:00 PM - 10:00 PM

Group Chat Name: A.K. Fans

Total Members: 35

Males: 0

Females: 35

Class Distribution:

A: 20

B: 7

C: 8

D: 0

Names of Members:

Class A:

- 2M1I1 (Admin/Creator)
- A2S
- DeKai
- Sawako
- Memento
- Nika0
- Ui-tan
- T0ka
- Yuu-chan
- Kabe-don
- Shizu
- Doragon
- Haato
- Salmoon
- Kuru0t0
- Hashiri (*New*)
- Ringo (*New*)
- Gh05T (*New*)
- Tamamo (*New*)
- Dachi (*New*)

Class B:

- Osa7jimi (Admin)
- Beer4U
- Fr00tky
- Iiko (*New*)
- WestNight (*New*)
- PinkE (*New*)
- Kazuhime (*New*)

Class C:

- BunBun (Admin)
- Weivu1
- WhiteFlower
- Dreamuu
- 2B^mi
- Ay0 (*New*)
- Miku (*New*)
- Jinja2 (*New*)

Chatrooms:

1st-Year Chatroom:

- [Welcome to the newcomers!]
- [I can't believe how big this group has gotten!] (2M1I1)
- [Well, you should.]
- [It's a fan group about Ayanokouji-kun, after all.] (T0ka)
- [That is indeed a great point.] (Osa7jimi)
- [True!] (2M1I1)
- [Hey, everyone!] (Kabe-don)
- [Heya!] (Ui-tan)
- [Hi.] (Shizu)
- [The group chat is finally back.]
- [Like, it's been so long since it got closed.] (Salmoon)
- [Well, it can't be regulated easily if it stays open every time.]
- (Weivu1)
- [I think it's great.]
- [We'll have more things to say if we chat with each other less often.] (Dreamuu)
- [That's so true.]
- [There's so much more of us now, too!] (Memento)
- [Yep! So let's have them talk right away!]
- [Alright, newcomers. Please introduce yourselves! Well, you don't really need to say anything about yourself. Just tell us why you decided to come here!]

[I can see that everyone is online, so we'll go by join order, from Class A to C, respectively.] (2M1I1)

[I'm excited to read everyone's responses.] (Nika0)

[Alright! New girls!] (BunBun)

[The stage is all yours.] (Doragon)

[Okay, I'll have to go first then.]

[I know I'm not alone here when I say I have a crush on him, right?] (Hashiri)

[Well, yeah.] (2M1I1)

[Yep!] (Kabe-don)

[Mhm.] (Doragon)

[I guess so.] (T0ka)

[So, yeah, that.]

[And of course, it's nice to see girls like me say great things about Ayanokouji-kun.] (Hashiri)

[Said like a true fan!] (Ui-tan)

[Thanks, @Hashiri-san!]

[Alright, let's keep it going!] (2M1I1)

[Hey everyone!]

[There really isn't anything unique about my reason. I just admire Ayanokouji-kun as a classmate and as a boy. I joined in to see what the other girls are saying about him.] (Ringo)

[Like @Ringo-san, I came to check things out between Ayanokouji-kun's admirers.] (Gh05T)

[I'm the same!] (Tamamo)

[Me too!] (Dachi)

[Thanks!]

[That was really straightforward and efficient!] (2M1I1)

[Welp, not much else could be said, anyway.] (T0ka)

[Let's hear it from the other classes then!] (2M1I1)

[I only got to know him during the Island Exam.] (Iiko)

[You talked?] (A2S)

[Ah, no, no.]

[I just heard my classmates talking about him. I've been curious ever since.] (Iiko)

[I'm practically the same.] (WestNight)

[I started getting curious about him during the Zodiac Exam.]

[From an outsider's perspective, he's a really mysterious guy... Though that didn't really change after I managed to talk to him...] (PinkE)

[Yep! He's fun to talk to. He's really innocent and cute, but I can't figure out what he's thinking.] (Kazuhime)

[Welp, that's practically Ayanokouji-kun.]

[Even us, his classmates, can't read him.] (2M1I1)

[Ayanokouji-kun is quite friendly with everyone in Class C, so I joined because I was curious about what everyone else thought of him.]

[It was also nice to see some members from the same class.] (Ay0)

[@PinkE-san was on-point with the mystery aspect.]

[That's what's so fun about Ayanokouji-kun!] (Miku)

[Being the last one doesn't really help. Everyone already laid down all of the reasons that I personally had. Lol.] (Jinja2)

[That's so true!]

[It's all good, though. Everyone's got a good grasp on your girls' reasons.]

[Also, due to how this group chat works, you wouldn't be able to backread any old messages, so I thought I'd briefly make the old members introduce themselves, but their reasons for being here are essentially the same.] (2M1I1)

[Yep.]

[Like, this introductory conversation was just like last time.] (Ui-tan)

[Welcome again, everyone! I look forward to chatting with you.] (Nika0)

[Please take care of me!] (Ringo)

[Thanks for the welcome.] (Iiko)

[Likewise.] (Osa7jimi)

[Us too!] (Weivu1)

Class A Chatroom:

[Okay. Let's address the elephant in the room...]

[It seems like every girl in Class 1-A has joined the group chat!] (2M1I1)

[Yeah... I guess so.] (Salmoon)

[That's amazing, to say the least.] (A2S)

[Like, not gonna lie, I didn't expect this. Although as @T0ka-san had said earlier, I should've.] (2M1I1)

[Wait a minute! If we're all here, then that means Karuizawa-san is also here with us, right?!] (Ringo)

[Well, yes. That should be the case.] (Nika0)

[Ah, sorry. I'm not implying anything. I just thought it was amazing that Ayanokouji-kun could make her his fan even though she has Hirata-kun as her boyfriend.] (Ringo)

[Ohh, that is amazing. Nothing less from Ayanokouji-kun!] (DeKai)

[I mean, they are close. And as the girls' leader, I guess she'd easily get a whiff of this group chat's existence.] (Ui-tan)

[Yep. You never know.]

[Like, she might even be talking to us already, and we just don't notice it!] (Salmoon)

[Now, now.]

[We're not here to expose each other, right?] (Memento)

[But it's really so amazing.]

[That all of the girls in our class are here, I mean.] (Sawako)

[Is there even any point in hiding behind code names then?]

[It's not like the girls from other classes will see our chat, and it'll get deleted after the closing.] (Memento)

[Oh, that's true.] (Tamamo)

[Wait, no!] (T0ka)

[Wait!] (Kabe-don)

[Wait, I don't think that's a good idea!] (Ui-tan)

[Wait a minute!] (Nika0)

[Oh...] (2M1I1)

[Wow. The four of you really panicked there.] (Hashiri)

[What I'm just saying is that some of us might still value their anonymity.] (T0ka)

[That's right!] (Kabe-don)

[I can understand that, especially coming from the two of you.

☹️] (DeKai)

[Well, we don't really need to expose ourselves, right?] (Ui-tan)

[I think staying behind our code names makes things more fun!]
(Nika0)

[Ahahaha!]

[There's no need to get worked up.]

[I think it's alright if we keep our identities hidden. This is just a forum between fans, after all.] (2M1I1)

[I knew you'd understand, @2M1I1-san!] (Ui-tan)

[Now then, let's talk about Ayanokouji-kun, shall we?] (2M1I1)

[Thanks to him, we're Class A now!] (Ui-tan)

[Yes! Although Horikita-san technically pushed us to promotion, it's obvious that Ayanokouji was the one who laid all the groundwork from the start.] (A2S)

[Well, he *was* the one who bought the explanation for the S-System.] (Dachi)

[I'll be honest, if Ayanokouji-kun hadn't done that, I might've committed tons of behavioral misconduct during class.] (Gh05T)

[Same...]

[I mean, if I noticed that they weren't calling us out or punishing us for using our phones or talking during class discussions, then I'd probably get carried away.] (Tamamo)

[Who wouldn't, though?]

[We couldn't have possibly guessed such a system to be in place.]

[Like, what are we, in a manga?] (Hashiri)

[Well, they say that reality is even weirder than fantasy sometimes.] (Doragon)

[I bet we'd have close to no points back in May if that happened.]
[I honestly don't mind that Horikita-san and Hirata-kun are leading us. They're smart, and they have Kushida-san and Karuizawa-san supporting them.] (A2S)

[I think Ayanokouji-kun would still be the optimal leader, but we can't keep depending on him, as a class.] (Kuru0t0)

[That's right. We need to show everyone that we're worthy of being Class A.] (Doragon)

[Ehh, it's kind of a pain, though. I'm sure things will be tougher from here on out.] (Tamamo)

[Yeah, I'm sure the following exams will be a bloodbath...] (Ringo)

[Ayanokouji-sama, save us!] (Gh05T)

[Ahh, Ayanokouji-kun's amazing feats are more apparent now because he's gone.] (Dachi)

[He's not gone, you know?]

[And think about it. Wouldn't this be a better chance to get to know him better? He has fewer responsibilities, after all!] (Memento)

[That's true!] (Tamamo)

[You're right!] (Dachi)

[Everyone sure is lively.]

[Oh, man. I remember hanging out with Ayanokouji-kun during the Island Exam.]

[I got to know him a little better.] (2M1I1)

[Ayanokouji-kun was really cool during the Island Exam!] (Haato)

[Yes!] (Shizu)

[Mhm!] (Yuu-chan)

[He went running like a madman to get those spots! He was super cool!] (DeKai)

[Now that I think recall, those spots were super far.]

[I'm surprised he didn't crave the comfort of the luxury ship after all that.] (Ui-tan)

[Nah, I'm sure he did.] (Kabe-don)

[Ahh, the luxury ship!]

[I missed the opportunity to hang out with him during our week on it!] (Ringo)

[Hehe, well *I* didn't!] (Hashiri)

[Me too!] (Doragon)

[Okay, nice flex.] (Ringo)

[How enviable.] (Dachi)

[As far as I know, Ayanokouji-kun took a backseat during the Zodiac Exam.] (Memento)

[That's what Hirata-kun said, too.] (Tamamo)

[Well, he did say that he wanted Horikita-san and the others to take it on without his help.] (Nika0)

[He was injured, too...] (Yuu-chan)

[Yeah, that was really worrying.] (Sawako)

[In the end, they managed to win. Horikita-san, Hirata-kun, and Kushida-san are amazing, aren't they?] (Haato)

[Let's forget about the exams for now!]

[Hasebe-san and Sakura-san are here, right? I wish I could ask them how it felt to be in the pool with Ayanokouji-kun.] (Dachi)

[Ahaha, well, they can't really talk about it in this chat, can they?] (DeKai)

[I was there and I saw them!] (Kabe-don)

[Wow, really?! What did you see?] (Tamamo)

[Well, apart from the excessive amount of people, it didn't really feel any different from when we were allowed to play in the pool during class.]

[They just seemed to be having fun.] (Kabe-don)

[Ohh, I see.] (Tamamo)

[That's pretty nice.] (Shizu)

[There's more, right?! I was there, too!] (DeKai)

[Ehh?! What did you see?!] (Kabe-don)

[I was eating some corndogs when I suddenly saw them playing volleyball.] (DeKai)

[Ayanokouji-kun was playing volleyball?!] (A2S)

[Kyah! What a turn-on!] (Gh05T)

[He must've looked so cool!] (Tamamo)

[He was!]

[Well, it was actually Sudou-kun who was carrying the game for them along with Horikita-san. Ayanokouji-kun didn't really do much until the final set.] (DeKai)

[Ehh, what happened?] (Hashiri)

[They were on match point, meaning they needed one point before winning the game. Ayanokouji-kun was the one who will serve the ball and you can guess what happened next!] (DeKai)

[He beat them with a serve?!] (T0ka)

[What do you call that again? A service ace?] (Ui-tan)

[Yes! It was the most powerful serve I've ever seen in my life, and I'm not even exaggerating! The defenders didn't even have the time to react! He looked so cool when he did it!] (DeKai)

[Kyah~!!] (2M1I1)

[Ahhh, I wanna see!] (Salmoon)

[Woah...] (Doragon)

[Me too!] (Dachi)

[He's too cool!] (T0ka)

[He's so dreamy!] (Tamamo)

[I wish I was there!!!] (Kabe-don)

[Oh, man... I'm so envious.] (Hashiri)

[Aww, I wish I could invite him out next vacation!] (2M1I1)

[We'll probably see less of him in action now that he's not a class leader.]

[But of course, my goal of becoming someone close to him won't change!] (T0ka)

[We're all the same!] (2M1I1)

[Yep!] (Memento)

[That's right!] (Ringo)

Class B Chatroom:

[Alright, everyone. I'll still address this even though it should be common sense. We are not going to talk about anything else other than Ayanokouji-kun, specifically about us getting demoted to Class B. We have other group chats for those.] (Osa7jimi)

[Of course. Those topics are irrelevant to why we're here.] (Beer4U)

[I'm genuinely a fan, regardless of what's happening with the class competition.] (PinkE)

[Aww, it's too bad that Ayanokouji-kun had stepped down.] (Kazuhime)

[Yes. I would've like to see more of him from the frontline.] (Iiko)

[He may have been doing it covertly during the last semester, but I'm sure he's a great class leader.] (WestNight)

[I may not have a crush on him like most of the girls here, but I still get why lots of them are so crazy about him.] (Kazuhime)

[Well, I wouldn't say crazy...] (PinkE)

[If we look at things objectively, we have heavy-hitters like Satonaka-kun, Hashimoto-kun, and Shiroki-kun. And then there's Hirata-kun, as well.] (Osa7jimi)

[Class C's Shibata-kun and Kanzaki-kun, too. Lots of girls find them cool.] (Kazuhime)

[Yes. And somehow, Ayanokouji-kun has a larger following than all of them, albeit a secret one. I guess that says a lot.] (Osa7jimi)

[Yeah.]

[After checking, I didn't find any other group chats like this one.] (Beer4U)

[I think it's his mysteriousness, after all.] (Fr00tky)

[Agree.] (Beer4U)

[I agree.] (Iiko)

[I wish I could talk to Ayanokouji-kun at length. It would be really great if I could have a nice, long chat with him.] (Osa7jimi)

[Your desires are leaking out.] (Beer4U)

[Oh my, I'm so sorry.] (Osa7jimi)

[Do you happen to have a crush on him, @Osa7jimi-san?] (PinkE)

[I'm not quite sure myself. I wonder.] (Osa7jimi)

[Ohh, okay, gotcha.] (PinkE)

[You almost typed something there, @Beer4U-san. Is something the matter?] (Osa7jimi)

[No, not really.] (Beer4U)

[Fufufu, I see.]

[Anyway, while we're on that topic, do any of you bear romantic feelings for Ayanokouji-kun then?] (Osa7jimi)

[As far as appearances go, I don't think I can develop a crush on him that easily given the circumstances.]

[My tastes may not be too specific when it comes to looks, but as @Osa7jimi-san had mentioned, we have handsome guys like Satonaka-kun in our class, too.] (WestNight)

[And for personality, that's probably much harder to figure out given how he's not even our classmate.] (Iiko)

[Those are really sound arguments. I assume the others feel the same?] (Osa7jimi)

[Well, yeah.] (PinkE)

[I think so.] (Kazuhime)

[I see.]

[But all of us are still fans, right? I guess that's wonderful.] (Osa7jimi)

[Well, he's really distinct from the other hot guys.]

[He catches my attention.] (WestNight)

[Yes. His demeanor draws me in, especially after observing it up close.] (Iiko)

[Oh, that's interesting. Up close, huh?] (Osa7jimi)

[It gives off that attractive mature vibe.]

[I've been lucky enough to somewhat interact with him during the luxury cruise ship trip.] (Iiko)

[It is pretty attractive, I guess. I mean most of the 1st-year guys still act like kids thinking they're cool.] (Beer4U)

[You sound resentful.] (Fr00tky)

[Not really. Just annoyed and fed up.] (Beer4U)

[Oh...] (Fr00tky)

[I think I can understand more of where my fellow Class B girls stand in this now.]

[Personally, I think Ayanokouji-kun is a wonderful person. I just

want to know more about him regardless of our classes' rivalry.] (Osa7jimi)

[If presented with such an opportunity, then I wouldn't mind it.] (Iiko)

[Nothing wrong with that, I guess.] (Beer4U)

Class C Chatroom:

[We have three new members! Yay!] (BunBun)

[Yay!] (Weivu1)

[I'm new here! 🥰]

[Now you guys start proclaiming your love for Ayanokouji-kun. I'll enjoy reading them. 🥰] (Miku)

[Hey, we're not *that* intense!] (2B^mi)

[We do think he's super cool, though.] (Dreamuu)

[Well, he *is* kinda cool.] (WhiteFlower)

[That's exactly why I joined!]

[I would like to know more about his coolness, gossip-wise.] (Ay0)

[Ooh, speaking of gossip, do you think Honami-chan is here?] (Jinja2)

[Hey, hey, we can't expose each others' identities, right?] (Miku)

[I know, but it's exciting to think about!]

[I have so many questions!]

[One of them being: Does she like Ayanokouji-kun?] (Jinja2)

[I don't know about that.] (WhiteFlower)

[They *are* close friends, but I don't think there's anything more than that.] (Weivu1)

[It would've been so romantic if they got together, though...]

[Just think about it! A forbidden love between two class leaders. They should've been rivals but they decided to put their feelings first! Ahh, so exciting!] (Jinja2)

[Now that I think about it...] (Ay0)

[Right?!] (Jinja2)

[What was that about not being this intense...?] (WhiteFlower)

[Well...] (2B^mi)

[And imagine them being in a relationship SECRETLY?!] (Jinja2)

[Okay, okay, these fantasies are getting out of hand.] (BunBun)

[Ehehe.] (Jinja2)

[It's not like I can't understand where you're coming from, though. The system of this school might be breakneck fierce, but it honestly made our high school days more thrilling.]

[Something like Ayanokouji-kun and Honami-chan being together makes my heart flutter.] (BunBun)

[Thrilling is the right word.] (Weivu1)

[Aww, I hope Ayanokouji-kun is in our class, though...] (2B^mi)

[Ahaha, I'm sure the Class A girls won't let that happen. They like him a lot, too.] (Dreamuu)

[Well, well, well.]

[Ayanokouji-kun stepped down as their leader, right?]

[Wouldn't this be a good chance to get close to him?] (Ay0)

[That *would've* been a good idea *if* the other girls hadn't thought of the same thing.]

[We know how Ayanokouji-kun is. He'd probably dislike that much attention from others.] (Weivu1)

[Ah, that's true. I wouldn't want him to hate me.] (Dreamuu)

[Welp, whatever happens, happens, I guess. I wish I could talk to him more though.] (BunBun)

[It's fiine.]

[Let's just admire him from afar!] (Miku)

[Like we always do!] (2B^mi)

[Yeah!] (BunBun)

Additional Group Chat Settings:

- 1st-Year Chatroom: Public
 - Class A Chatroom: Private
 - Class B Chatroom: Private
 - Class C Chatroom: Private
- (Only users with Creator Privileges have access to all Private Chatrooms)
- Screenshots: Disabled
 - Clear Cycle: Every 24 Hours, 6:00 AM

Membership Settings:

- Male: Invite-only
- Female: Visible to all

Note:

Due to the increasing amount of members, the Group Chat will be scheduled to only open on specific dates. The dates are unspecified, but the Creator will send a notification to all members 3 days before the group chat opens again.

Vol. 5: Chapter 1.1 - The School Sports Festival

"Alright! See ya later, Ayanokouji!"

"Yeah."

I returned to the classroom after hanging out with some guys from my class. The second semester has finally started, and I certainly feel the life of a normal high school student. With a healthy reputation inside my class, my social status is very stable, and I'm surrounded by people who think fondly of me.

Really, what a great time to be alive.

"Starting today, classes begin again. However, from September to the beginning of October, we will be holding more physical education classes to prepare for the school sports festival. Students seated at the front, please pass handouts to those behind you, and so on."

Well... that didn't last long.

Our afternoon class was turned into a two-hour homeroom period. Chabashira-sensei started to instruct us with her usual tone. Most of us were pretty excited. It was one of the long-awaited events for any high school student along with the cultural festival. Well, this school, unfortunately, doesn't have a cultural festival, so we're happy with whatever we get.

"The details on the printed handouts can also be found on the school homepage. Please refer to them if necessary." Chabashira-sensei continued looking forward in silence, waiting for questions to come.

"Sensei, is the sports festival another one of the special exams?" Hirata asked, raising his hand.

"You're free to interpret this however you wish. In any case, this event will massively impact each and every class."

"We'll probably get points and stuff, right? Then it is another special exam," said Ike, inserting himself into the conversation.

"Let's say that you'll indeed get points. The same thing happens with your midterms and final exams, but they're not *special exams*, correct? And what if you lose points? The same thing happens whenever you're caught misbehaving during and even outside

classes. From your words, your everyday school life would also count as a special exam. Is that what you're trying to say, Ike?"

Well, yeah. In fact, being enrolled in this school probably counts as a special exam already.

"U-Uh... I guess not...?" Unfortunately, he couldn't find the right words after Chabashira-sensei dismantled his statement with an argument exploiting semantics.

Most of our classmates didn't even pay attention to Ike, though. The frail students were worried and the ones who hated exercise were grumbling. Of course, athletic ones like Ken and Onodera were hyped about this.

"Ayanokouji-kun, look..." While everyone else agonized over the surface-level details, Horikita pointed something out from the handout that she was reading.

I checked what she was referring to when I noticed that Chabashira-sensei was glancing at us.

"For this year's sports festival, we're going to divide all students across all grade levels into two groups and have them compete with each other." She relayed some more information about the event as I read through the handout. "You, Class A will be teaming up with Class D as part of the Red Team. Class B and C will team up in the same fashion as part of the White Team. They will compete alongside you."

"Whoa... Seriously? We're doing that...?" muttered Ike.

He wasn't the only one with this sentiment, though. A lot of us probably thought that the school would pit all four classes against one another, just like the first two written exams and the first two special exams. The class would need to create a new strategy that factors cooperation out in the open.

Not only that... We'd also have to cooperate with students from other year levels.

"Doesn't this make you happy?" I asked.

"I would appreciate it if you refrain from talking about that here," she warned.

I almost skipped the "warned" part and went straight to the "attacked" part. The tip of her pencil shook like a cornered rattlesnake and I didn't want to be on the receiving end of it.

While fearing for my life, I flipped the page over and saw the general rules and mechanics for the event.

Sports Festival Rules and Team Division

The sports festival divides all students, across all grade levels, into two teams: Red and White: The breakdown goes as follows: Classes A and D are on the Red Team, while Class B and C are on the White Team.

Point Allocation for All Competitors (Individual Competitions)

Points will be allocated as follows:

- **1st place** will be awarded **15 points**
- **2nd place** will be awarded **12 points**
- **3rd place** will be awarded **10 points**
- **4th place** will be awarded **8 points**

1 point will be deducted for coming in fifth place, and one additional point will be subtracted for each place below that.

During a team competition, the winning team will be awarded **500 points**.

Point Allocation for Recommended Competitors

Points will be allocated as follows:

- **1st place** will be awarded **50 points**
- **2nd place** will be awarded **30 points**
- **3rd place** will be awarded **15 points**
- **4th place** will be awarded **10 points**

2 points will be deducted for coming in fifth place, and two additional points will be subtracted for each place below that.

The final competition, the **Relay Race**, will offer **three times** the point values.

Red Team vs. White Team Outcome

After reviewing the combined overall score for each class, **100 class points** will be deducted from the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-year batches of the two classes on the losing team.

The Effect of Ranking by Grade Level

50 class points will be awarded to the class that scores the highest and achieves **1st place** in each of the three grade levels. Classes that achieve **2nd place** in their grade level will **not see any changes to their class point totals**. Classes that achieve **3rd place** in their grade level will have **50 class points** deducted, and classes that achieve **4th place** will have **100 class points** deducted.

"Um, Sensei, how many points does the winning team get? That doesn't appear to be written anywhere," said Hirata.

"None. Their reward will be not having any points deducted." Chabashira-sensei's brief response showed how naive Hirata's question was.

The class moaned in misery. It didn't seem like the setbacks and rewards were proportionate at all. In the Deserted Island Exam, we had to camp out for a week, but there were no risks to our class points no matter the outcome. The Zodiac Exam *had* risks but the rewards were ridiculously huge. The upcoming sports festival doesn't feel like it's in the same vein.

"Please keep in mind that points are awarded and deducted not just by team but on a class-by-class basis. So even if the Red Team wins, you'll still be hit by the 100-point penalty if Class 1-A gets the lowest overall score compared to the other 1st-year classes," she added in the midst of the pandemonium.

The worst-case scenario would be being in a losing team while placing 4th place in our year. Our class would be penalized by 200 class points in total. I'm sure everyone was worried about that.

Individual Competition Rewards (applicable to the next midterm exam)

*Students who achieve **1st place** in an individual competition will be awarded either **5000 private points** or a score equivalent to **3 points** on a written test.*

*Students who achieve **2nd place** in an individual competition will be awarded either **3000 private points** or a score equivalent to **2 points** on a written test.*

*Students who achieve **3rd place** in an individual competition will be awarded either **1000 private points** or a score equivalent to **1 point** on a written test.*

In the event that a student accepts the test points, they will not be allowed to give those test points to another student.

*Students who score lowest in an individual competition will have **1000 private points** deducted from their total.*

*In the event that a student has less than **1000 private points**, they will instead receive a **1-point penalty** on the next written exam.*

Regarding Rule Violations and Foul Play

*Read and comply with every competition's rules. Those who violate the rules will be **disqualified**. Anyone engaging in foul play may render **all previously awarded points invalid**.*

MVP Reward

*The student who receives the **highest total score** across all competitions will be awarded **100,000 private points**.*

MVP Rewards for Each Individual Grade Level

*The three students from each grade level who receive their grade's **highest total score** across all competitions will be awarded **10,000 private points**.*

Considering its scale, the sports festival offered lesser rewards in terms of point value compared to the two previous special exams. However, we can't count out the variety of potential benefits.

"Um, Sensei. The perks that are written here, about receiving points for written test..." Ike called out in a loud voice.

"It's exactly what you think it is, Ike. You can earn test points as a

prize, which you can apply to a written exam. In this case, the rewards are applicable for the next midterms. You struggle with English and Mathematics, right? I'm sure they'd be useful to you."

The most athletic students looked understandably excited. If academics weren't their strongest suit, they could supplement their results using these points. Of course, students like Horikita and Hirata who excel in both didn't have much use for it, but they'll get private points instead.

That said, more than a few students who weren't confident in both their athletics and academics looked a bit worried, especially after seeing another part of the handout.

Penalties for the Lowest Scorers

After all the competitions end, the school will calculate each student's total points and assign penalties to the ten lowest-scoring students from each year. The exact nature of these penalties will vary depending on grade level, so please consult the homeroom instructor in charge.

This was what most of us were worried about.

"Sensei, what kind of penalty will the 1st-years get?" asked Horikita.

"You freshmen would be penalized through point deductions on your next written exam scores. The ten students with the lowest overall scores will each receive a deduction of 10 points," she answered.

"Ehhh...?"

"Seriously...?"

"Aghh!"

If the penalties from this sports festival cause them to have a failing midterms grade, then they'd be expelled-- no question. Their reactions were only natural.

Moving on from the rules were the actual sports events that we'd be participating in. They were separated into two main categories: "All Participants" and "Recommended Participants". Of course, they were exactly as they sounded.

The events in the All Participants category would include all students in a class. Meanwhile, only a select few would participate in the Recommended Participants events. The representatives would be nominated and selected by the class.

Events for All Participants

- 100 m Dash
- Hurdle Race
- Capture the Flag (boys only)

- *Ball Toss (girls only)*
- *Tug-of-War (separate events by gender)*
- *Obstacle Course Race*
- *Three-Legged Race*
- *Cavalry Battle*
- *200 m Dash*

Events for Recommended Participants

- *Scavenger Hunt*
- *Four-Way Tug-of-War*
- *Three-Legged Race (mixed gender)*
- *1200 m Relay Race (mixed gender, all 3 grades)*

There were 13 competitions in total... What a lineup.

They were arranged based on the order they'd be held in. Some were dissatisfied with the large number of All Participants Events compared to Recommended Participants Events.

Maezono raised her hand and asked.

"Sensei, wouldn't this mean that there would be, like, three or four events for a single person? And besides, is it even possible to do all these in one day?"

"I appreciate your concern, but the school already considered that. No events require specific skills, such as cheerleading, dancing, ball games, or coordinated group gymnastics. The sports festival will be a thorough test of your general physical ability and stamina," she explained.

The unathletic students' resistance was in vain. Chabashira-sensei, as an extension of the school, had anticipated their every complaint.

"Here's the participation table. Fill it out with the order you'll participate in, and I will submit it to the school on your behalf. I don't imagine any junior high school has adopted a system like this, so do be extra careful not to make any mistakes."

Hirata stood up and received the participation table.

"Exactly how much freedom do we have, Sensei?" he asked.

"Your class must come to a consensus on everything to do with the sports festival, such as which students will participate in which events. No changes will be allowed once the deadline passes, no matter the reason. The submission window opens one week prior to the festival and ends at 5:00 PM on the day before it begins. If by any chance you miss the submission, you will be assigned randomly, so be careful."

"Sensei, in the event of someone's absence, what do we do? For individual competitions, I assume that would be treated as an absence, but what about group competitions? In games like the Cavalry Battle and the Three-Legged Race, we might not be able to

compete at all if one important person is missing," Horikita raised her hand and asked an all-important batch of questions.

The class seemed impressed by her initiative to ask about this given how much it can impact our results.

"Should you fall short of the minimum required number of people for competitions in the All Participants category, you will be deemed unable to take part and disqualified. However, you are permitted to arrange a substitute for absentees in the Recommended Participants events," Chabashira-sensei explained. "Of course, you'll have to offer points as compensation."

If we'd have to pay to prove we weren't cheating, then I wonder how big the required amount will be?

"I see... While we're on the subject, if an athlete's health suffers, or they're severely injured, will it be possible for that person to continue participating if they wish? Or will they have to stop and see a doctor?" she asked?

"We leave that to the students to decide for themselves. Knowing your own limits will be an indispensable skill in the working world. For an instance, you can't simply take a day off just because you have a fever on the date of an extremely important conference," replied Chabashira-sensei.

"I understand. Well then... How many points are needed to assign a substitute?"

"A substitute requires 100,000 private points per competition. That's expensive or cheap depending on your resources."

"I see. Thank you very much."

Given our position and funds, 100,000 private points is an affordable amount. However, we can't use them up willy-nilly. It equates to a student's entire monthly allowance after starting school. We may be rich right now, but it's still not a small number.

"If there are no more questions, we'll wrap up," said Chabashira-sensei. "Next period's location will move to Gymnasium 1 where you'll meet up with students from other classes and grade levels."

Some were murmuring amongst themselves about the current situation, but most of us were just waiting for Chabashira-sensei to close everything out. However, we didn't expect her next words.

"Before I go, I would like to address one specific thing." Her usually cold expression wasn't as apparent and I think I could make out a small, gentle smile on her face. "Congratulations on reaching Class A. I honestly didn't think you lot could make it, that's why I didn't pay much attention to your efforts, but you've proven me wrong."

The classroom suddenly became overcome with silence. Everyone was dumbfounded about what they just heard.

"This school has been around for a little over 50 years now, and you're the only Class D who had ever accomplished the feat of overtaking Class A. And you've done so in your freshmen year, too. I cannot stress how amazing that is."

Chabashira-sensei spoke calmly, which was honestly just her usual tone. But because of her words, we didn't feel her cold and detached self. She chuckled after noticing how speechless we were.

"It seems like it's a bit too late for me to start acting like a teacher now, given your reactions. However, my point still stands. I'm proud of you, *but* it takes more than what you've achieved to be on top of this school." Chabashira-sensei gracefully walked to the door with her parting words. "Your journey here is just getting started, I hope you don't forget that."

"Yes, Sensei." Hirata managed to snap out of it and addressed her as she went out of the room.

After the sliding door was closed, Class 1-A has been enveloped by silence once again. I saw Horikita and Hirata glance and nod to each other before making their move.

"Everyone, I know Chabashira-sensei caught us off-guard just now, but I think we should start talking about our plans for the sports festival." Hirata walked to the front and clapped twice to make everyone notice him.

"Man, that was something. I didn't know Sae-chan-sensei loved us *that* much!" shouted Ike.

"Really! My heart went '*Kyun~*' for that one!" followed Yamauchi.

"Didn't that, like, sound really cheesy~?" said Satou.

"Not gonna lie, I felt both proud and embarrassed," added Shinohara.

After Hirata fixed the weird atmosphere, the class became noisy once again. Horikita got up and propped herself next to Hirata.

"Alright. May I have everyone's attention, please?" Horikita was standing where Chabashira-sensei stood just seconds ago. Everyone stopped talking and looked at her. "Thank you. Now then, why don't we use our remaining time to discuss what Class 1-A will do for this sports festival?"

Her question was met with different kinds of smiles-- gentle ones, anxious ones, excited ones-- But one thing was for sure. Our class was ready to take on the sports festival.

Vol. 5: Chapter 1.2 - Class 1-A's Plan

"Firstly, we must address our main problem." Horikita started off with the thing that's been weighing on everyone's mind. "For this sports festival, we'll be teaming up with Class D. In other words, Ryuuen-kun's class."

A lot of my classmates looked anxious. Some of them instinctively gave me a glance. Of course, I plan to do nothing but sit back and watch for now.

"That bastard..." grumbled Yamauchi.

Ike looked pretty pissed, as well.

"No way in hell I'd cooperate with that guy," said Ken.

"I understand that this will be a team battle, but this is Ryuuen we're talking about." Akito backed him up.

He was usually quiet in these kinds of discussions, but considering our partners for the sports festival, he didn't hesitate to say what he was thinking.

"Frankly speaking, I don't think it's possible to work with him, too. In all likelihood, Ryuuen-kun might even do something to trip us up, even though we're in the same team," Horikita sighed. "But we can't make hasty decisions. For now, it's good that this was brought to everyone's attention. We'll continue discussing this topic after getting a feel for what they want to do."

"For now, why don't we talk about the direction we wanna go to for this sports festival?" asked Hirata.

"Have fun and win!" yelled Ike.

"Having fun is easy, but winning is a hard goal even if we don't try to have fun," explained Horikita. "There are the test point rewards, but winning can earn you some private points, as well. Is that what you're talking about with having fun, Ike-kun?"

Horikita had easily seen through their motives.

"Well, yeah! Having additional points will boost our class's economy, right?"

"Yes, you're right. But here's the kicker. Do you think you can win?" she asked.

"W-Well, who knows? Miracles happen all the time, right?"

"I'll participate in all of the Recommended Participants competitions. If we do that, I'm sure we'll win," Ken proposed what seemed to be a good idea. The class agrees with him, too.

"Wouldn't that dampen the chance for others, though?" asked Yamauchi.

"Obviously, but doing so would help our class win in the long run. I'm your best bet in taking home the victory for this."

Ken didn't excel in academics. In fact, he was incredibly bad at it. He may have been making a lot of progress as time goes on, but the sports festival is where he can really shine.

"It would be great if the class could win, but I get where Haruki and Kanji are coming from," said Miyamoto.

Hondou nodded in agreement.

"I can obviously understand the merit of gaining private points, but there's a huge dent in your argument. If our class was running low on private points, then I might've considered your suggestion. But over the course of receiving six months' worth of allowances from the 1st of April to the 1st of September, each Class A student should've had a grand total of 520,400 private points. We are in no way lacking in terms of individual budgets. I haven't even distributed the rewards from the Zodiac Exam. There's no reason for us to prioritize those who can't secure results," explained Horikita.

"Well..." The four of them can't really say anything back. Our classmates seemed to be on Horikita's side, too.

"Unless of course, that's exactly the case. Are you guys running low on private points?"

"What? No. I still have a lot-- like 200,000..." replied Ike.

"Are the three of you the same?" She looked at Miyamoto and the other two.

"Uhh, yeah... Kinda..."

The private points we gained on September 1st were 121,200 private points. That means over the course of five months, Ike and his friends only had about 80,000 left from a grand total of around 400,000... They sure spend a lot.

The class gave them weird looks after hearing that. I also noticed that some of the girls had nervous expressions. Maybe they've spent a similar amount. Well, it was easy to get carried away when you have this much money, so it's not like I can't see where they're coming from.

"If you have any *other* suggestions that can enhance our chances, then feel free to speak." Horikita didn't wait very long before continuing. "Hirata-kun and I have a very orthodox plan which should be good both on paper and in practice. Since there are no events involving technical knowledge and skills, we'll be stacking the most athletic individuals for the Recommended Participants competitions. Of course, stamina would be a problem, so we'll carefully take that into account as the days go on."

Technical sports like basketball weren't included in the competition. Anyone could play and win in any of these events as long they're athletic enough. In other words, Horikita and Hirata want to brute-force their way to victory, with Ken spearheading the charge. It's a simple yet extremely effective plan.

"For those who don't have the best athletic abilities, we can try to prevent your overall scores from plummeting by assigning you to a specific Recommended Participants competition, which is the Scavenger Hunt." Hirata tapped that certain part of the handout.

"Since your participation in the All Participants competitions is mandatory, you will lose to more athletic students and your scores will inevitably suffer. Participating in the Scavenger Hunt should help, even a little," said Horikita.

"But I think it'll be alright. We still have a month to prepare for this. If everyone trains properly, your results will surely improve," he encouraged.

After the two of them finished their briefing, it was finally time for our second homeroom.

"Now that everyone has a general idea of how our class will tackle this event, we'll continue with the specifics at a later date." Horikita brought the discussion to an end.

Vol. 5: Chapter 1.3 - The State of Teams

Over four hundred people with a mix of students and instructors gathered in the gymnasium during our 2nd homeroom period. Horikita scanned the place with a slightly fretful expression.

"Are you looking for him?" I whispered.

She flinched in surprise. I thought she'd scold me again, but Horikita stopped glaring at me as soon as she saw my genuinely curious stare.

"Well... yes," she replied timidly.

"You wouldn't be able to spot him this easily in this crowd."

There wasn't any point in teasing someone who decided to answer honestly, so I tried to keep an eye out for him, too.

"It's okay. I just tried to check if he's somewhere noticeable."

Horikita was someone who appeared tough, but she was actually very delicate. She hates being vulnerable, so no one's really seen that side of her. Well, no one except for me. That little coincidence back then was probably why I could understand her more than most people, and why she opens up to me even with her personality.

After lining up without any particular order or form, our class sat down in an empty area. Nothing was really happening yet. The instructors were just there to keep things peaceful and civil. I glanced in Kikyuu's direction and saw her chatting with Hondou and the others. I guess I can just ask for her impressions on this assembly later on.

A short minute passed and a bunch of students came forward. Everyone focused their attention on them, eager to hear some instructions.

"I'm Fujimaki, from Class 3-A. It's been decided that I will assume command of the Red Team."

I glanced at Horikita and she also seemed to be in thought. Considering that her older brother was the student council president, I assumed that he would be taking the lead. That doesn't seem to be the case, though.

The class pairs of A and D started to assemble and sit near Fujimaki's general area.

I can hear a different voice on the opposite side of the gymnasium. It was probably the commander of the White Team, not that I should worry about them right now.

"I'd like to give the 1st-year students one piece of advice. The sports festival is extremely important. Your experiences here will most certainly be applicable to real life. In fact, many of your future exams may look like games at first glance. However, each and every one of them is a crucial battle in which you stake your survival in this school," said Fujimaki.

His words were a bit vague but still helpful.

"You may not feel motivated right now, but we're going to try and win this thing. I want you to try and hold on to that feeling," he continued. "The only competition in which all classes from all grade levels will participate together is the final event-- the 1200-meter Relay Race. Aside from that, all the other events are divided up by grade level. So, please, feel free to gather and discuss your strategies, starting now."

In response to Fujimaki's words, the students from both the 2nd and 3rd years grouped up without much delay. Our class seemed to flounder in comparison. Of course, our "*partners*" were also in sight. They didn't move an inch.

Hirata assembled our class to look a bit more orderly as Horikita took the initiative to approach Class D.

"Oh? Would you look at that? It's Class 1-A, our dear allies."

"I'll be blunt, Ryuuen-kun. Our class is open for cooperation, but that's only if you fulfill your end of the bargain." Horikita preemptively took hold of the conversation.

"Look at you, acting like a big shot all of a sudden. Did your new title as Class A's leader reach your head, Suzune?"

"We don't have time for your nonsense, Ryuuen. All we need is a yes or no."

To everyone's surprise, that return didn't come from Horikita nor Hirata. It came from Akito.

"Hey, Miyake, who do you think you're talking to?!" yelled Ishizaki.

"Lackeys shouldn't speak, Ishizaki."

"Why you-!"

"Drop it, Ishizaki. This isn't the place to throw down. Miyake can run his mouth like that precisely because that's the case. Don't get caught in his flow," Ryuuen calmly stops him with a smile.

Knowing Akito, I doubt he'd be afraid to speak up to Ryuuen regardless of the place, though.

"Anyway, let's get back to your question. Will I cooperate? The short answer is no. I'm sure you can already guess why, right, Suzune? Because we don't need to." Ryuuen turned around, putting his hands inside his pockets. "Good luck on whatever strategy you'll come up with, *Class A*."

He walked away with his entire class in tow.

"Hey, Horikita-chan, what did that guy mean by us not needing to cooperate?" asked Ike. His voice was a bit more serious than usual.

"Yeah, I don't understand."

"Isn't this a team battle?"

His question was echoed by the others.

"That's because, in terms of individual athletic abilities, the combination of our two classes would probably be the most lethal," she said.

That was honestly a fair evaluation. Class B has some well-built students, but that's about it. Class C has a star athlete in Shibata, along with other similarly capable students, but that's where it ends for them. Meanwhile, Class A has Sudou, who's arguably the most athletic 1st-year right now. And Class D has the largest assortment of physically gifted students.

"If team-centered sports like basketball, volleyball, or soccer were abundant in the sports festival, then they may have a chance. After all, the White Team line-up consists of the two most well-coordinated classes. Namely, Ichinose-san's class and the former Class A."

"No one would beat me in basketball. What are you talking about?" whined Ken.

"Yes, of course. Even I know that. But if your opponents are a coordinated team of five, then you wouldn't stand a chance. An untrained team might even hold you back rather than if you're playing them alone. And even if you did win, you can't possibly do the same for sports like volleyball or soccer."

"I... I guess so..." As an athlete, he understood that more than anyone.

"Remember, the events are composed of competitions that test our general physical abilities and stamina. That's why both of our classes will strive if we're not in contact. Class A has me, Hirata-kun, Ayanokouji-kun, Onodera-san, and some others, but it's still centered around Sudou-kun's physical prowess which means his individuality will shine. Meanwhile, Class D will benefit on its own, but for a different reason. If we try to compete side-by-side, we might just trample each other."

"With guys like Ishizaki and Yamada, I guess that can happen literally, even," commented Kikuchi, to which the guys in our class agreed.

Considering how we were once Classes C and D, it would be appropriate to associate us with "chaos", with the former Classes A and B as "order". Horikita wants us to ride the wave of chaos instead of containing it to avoid collapse.

"But in theory, shouldn't we at least incorporate our participation tables together so we can dominate without unintentionally fighting each other?" asked Ryuuko.

"You're absolutely right, Nishimura-san... That would've been the optimal choice, but there's one big problem..." Horikita answered with a conflicted expression.

"It's the fact that it's Ryuuen-kun, right, Horikita-san?" continued Matsushita.

"Yes. Even if we're teammates, I doubt he'd hesitate in sabotaging our lineup if he gets a hold of our participation table. He might even deceive us by presenting a fake," she explained.

"We're Class A, remember? *We're* the ones they're trying to overthrow now. Like, the rules don't necessarily provide us any protection from a well-executed subterfuge," added Karuizawa.

"In other words, we can only protect ourselves. Is that why you're not that opposed to Ryuuen-kun's suggestion, Horikita-san?" asked Hirata.

She nodded in response. After a brief talk, our class had finally come to a conclusion.

"Ohh, Horikita-san and the rest of Class A! Hey there!"

A familiar voice called out to us. It was none other than Class C's leader, Ichinose Honami.

"Is the White Team duo done with their meeting?" asked Horikita.

"Well, kinda. I really wanted to cooperate with Sakayanagi-san and the rest of Class B. You guys will be a really tough competition, after all."

"Sakayanagi...?"

"Ahh, right. It doesn't seem like Katsuragi-kun will be taking the lead in their class this time."

Overhearing this, most of us looked over to where the Class B students settled down. One girl stood out because she sat on a chair instead of the floor. Eyes were drawn to the cane she was holding.

"Ohhh! Dude, look!"

"She's a total cutie!"

"That's Class B's Sakayanagi-chan, huh?"

"She looks so petite and delicate!"

Sakayanagi Arisu-- her name reminded me of a certain mysterious girl who fell down a rabbit hole to Wonderland. With her short, silver hair, and pale skin, Sakayanagi's appearance was quite eye-catching.

So this girl is the rumored leader of the other faction, the person I'd talked to during that phone call, the Chairman's daughter... and the only other student who knows about my past.

"She won't be able to participate in any of the competitions due to

her weak heart. Her condition had affected her legs, as well, so please be sensitive about it," she said.

"Ichinose-san, it seems like you've invited some friends from another class." Noticing the looks from the guys in our class, Sakayanagi called out to Ichinose instead.

"Good day to you, Sakayanagi-san. We were actually just about to exit the gymnasium. I'm sorry if we're bothering your strategy meeting." Hirata instantly took action.

"Oh, please, don't worry. We're currently just waiting for further instructions from the seniors, anyway. Our classes hadn't had the chance to say hello, so maybe this was a good chance encounter. It's late, but I would like to congratulate you for making it to Class A."

Belligerent and confrontational. That was how Sakayanagi was often described to me. She also gave off that impression during our first conversation. However, she was very polite and well-spoken right now. Not a hint of aggression could be seen.

However, the fact that she was *kind enough* to celebrate our promotion was a violent stab at the other faction-- the fallen faction of Katsuragi. According to Kikyuu, Katsuragi lost all of his prestige inside their class after they got demoted. After all, they lost badly under his leadership on two consecutive special exams. There's no way his faction can stay intact after that.

Looking at Katsuragi's current state, it seems like she was telling the truth. He was lined up like the rest of the class, unlike Sakayanagi or other star students like Tsukasaki and Matoba.

"You didn't have to, Sakayanagi-san," Hirata accepted her congratulations with a smile. "We're still in our freshmen year. I'm sure things are just getting started."

"That is true. The gap between our points isn't that far from each other. Ichinose-san's class and even Ryuuken-kun's class are still very much in the race."

"Of course! We're going to try and close that gap in this sports festival, right, guys?" Ichinose riled up her classmates with that question.

And before I knew it, Ken and some others were already chatting with Class C's Shibata and his friends. They're all harping about beating each other in the competitions.

"Speaking of Ryuuken-kun, I don't see him anywhere," said Sakayanagi.

"It seems like having a meeting with us wasn't in his schedule. I envy the solidarity between Class B and C," replied Horikita.

"Ehhh, so he ditched you guys without any plans? That's certainly Ryuuken-kun's thing."

The Class A students who had been listening instantly grew tense.

They knew Horikita wasn't telling the whole story. Considering how we don't know anything regarding the state of their alliance, Horikita wasn't just about to give them free information.

Sakayanagi's gentle yet enigmatic smile could be seen as she scrutinized her.

"That's a shame. In terms of raw physical prowess and athletic abilities, Class A and D seem to be the best possible duo."

Since she was Class B's leader, students like Hashimoto or Kamuro could give her all the data she needed. It wasn't really surprising for her to have the same evaluation as Horikita despite not being present during the first two special exams.

"I think so, too! They have a lot of sporty guys and gals."

"Your class can surely stand up to them, Ichinose-san." Sakayanagi praised.

"Ryuuen-kun's class has power, that's for sure. But when it comes to speed, I think Class C would be the superior contender," said Hirata.

A cycle of back and forth. As a listener who was more or less aware of the situation, it didn't seem like anyone let their guard down. No significant information was exchanged nor given away. Everything just ended up being idle talk.

After that brief conversation between the leaders of the three classes, we finally made our exit from the gymnasium.

"Kikyou-chan, did you know...-?"

"Shut it, Soshi!"

"Sonoda-san!"

"Watase-san, what's up?"

"Satonaka, let's go to the karaoke!"

Many students started making noise.

Some of our classmates went to Keyaki Mall while most of them walked straight back to the dorms. A number of them were even hanging out with students from other classes. I saw Kikyou and Ishikura walking with Hondou and Miyamoto. I wanted to talk to her, but they seem to be having a fun conversation, so I guess the waiting will have to be extended.

I stood by the exit for some time with my phone in hand. I checked the Ayanokouji Group chat and found out that Ken and Akito went to their clubs. Meanwhile, Airi and Haruka decided to wait inside the classroom for the Photo Contest results.

"Ayanokouji-kun..." Just then, Horikita suddenly called out to me. "Were you waiting for me?"

She finally got back after talking to some seniors. I tucked my phone back and faced her.

"Yeah, I thought you wanted to ask me something."

We started walking as the conversation began.

"Yes, actually. I want to know what your plans are. Are you going to hold back, like what you're doing with your written tests? Or will you go all-out? I'll try my best to adjust accordingly," she asked.

"Hold back? The class knows how athletic I am. If I get lackluster results, they'll think I'm not taking this seriously. It's a no-good plan."

"That's true. Some of them even expect you to get better results than Sudou-kun... But you don't want to attract any more attention, right? What are you going to do?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. I'll participate like how a normal member of the class would and try my best. I hate it when everyone's eyes are on me, but I can't afford to hold back in the competitions that I'm in."

"Alright. I have a proposal, then. Like with your excuse regarding mental stress, we can limit your participation by using stamina as the reason."

"That's my idea, too."

"Then, it's settled."

I looked ahead as if the conversation was over. Horikita seemed satisfied, as well.

"Also, anyone's grades would stagnate if they stop studying," I said, breaking the silence.

"So your whole spiel about having reached the peak of academic education was a lie?" Horikita raised an eyebrow.

"You actually believed that?"

"I'm honestly still on the fence. No one would normally believe such nonsense, but for some reason, I can't seem to dismiss your words as lies back then, especially when you were able to back them up by scoring perfects in our first quizzes."

Back then, it didn't really matter whether she believed me or not, as long as she didn't get in my way.

"Well, anyway, I'll be counting on you for my role in the sports festival. Good luck."

"You sure are enjoying your life right now."

"You bet I am."

"I see. Good for you, then, Ayanokouji-kun," she sighed.

I walked away towards the main building. I didn't look back even after noticing that Horikita went the other way. We have separate matters to attend to. While I was treading my path, I saw a familiar girl going to the special building. It felt strange, but I didn't put too much mind into it. I promised Airi that I would check out the results with them later on.

Author's Notes:

In the Light Novel, Katsuragi's reputation was still a bit intact with some students following him.

But in this timeline, his leadership in the first two special exams cost them their position as Class A. His faction was completely dissolved as a result, and he could only convince his most loyal subordinates to follow Sakayanagi instead, even if they didn't like her.

SS.24 - At the End of the Day

"Ah, Kiyopon~!"

"Airi, Haruka. Are the results out?"

"Yeah! According to the school's post, the results had just been posted in the main building lobby. We're on our way there."

"Let's go together then," I said.

The two of them nodded in response.

"Oh, it's Sakura-chan and the others!"

Three girls approached us after we arrived in the immediate area. They were Azuma, Ichihashi, and Ryuuko.

"Ichihashi-san, Azuma-san! Even Nishimura-san is here. Did you come to look at the results, too?" asked Airi.

I glanced at Haruka who didn't have the most enthusiastic expression but was still smiling.

"We saw how great your entry was when you were finalizing it. Of course, we're here to see it place high!"

"It suddenly got pretty crowded, though."

"Alright! Why don't we go ahead and take a look?"

The six of us walked forward and saw the big displays. The entries were set up on a huge long table supported by frames and stands, and each of them was accompanied by details descriptions. All of them were great photographs with amazing edits. I can see why these entries were chosen as winners and honorable mentions.

"Woah, Sakura-chan! That's yours!" yelled Ichihashi.

"Geh-! You placed 2nd!" said Azuma, who had mixed feelings about the results. "I'm so happy for you, but... M-My face and my body!"

"Looks like your beautiful self is up for display, Sana-san," teased Ryuuko.

"The aloof and mature impression one would usually get from Sana-chan can't be found anywhere here."

"Sakura-san really captured your child-like innocence."

"Stop analyzing it again!"

"I-I placed just behind Kawauchi-senpai...? T-That high...?! Really...?" The girl in question couldn't believe what she just heard and seen.

Haruka and I walked toward the standing display of the 2nd placer along with the nervous Airi.

"Sakura Airi from Class 1-A. I'm glad they managed to update your class in time. It would've been funny if you were still in Class B," joke Haruka.

"This is the first time I've seen this... You really did a great job, Airi." I gave her an honest compliment. Even though this was her first time, Airi truly deserved to be in 2nd place with this entry.

A bunch of 2nd-year students approached our area and looked at the photo.

"Woah, check this out."

"That's a nice picture, huh?"

"The girl in it looks mad cute."

"She's a student in this school, right?"

"Do you think it's the girl who took the photo?"

"Are you dumb? Do you think this amazing angle could be taken without anyone holding the camera? And you can't be the subject of your own entry based on the rules!"

"Well, you're the one who entered this competition! Hell if I know the rules?!"

"Hey, stop fighting, you dimwits. Both names are here, anyway. The photographer is Sakura... Sakura Airi. And the subject is Azuma... Azuma Sana. Their names are easy to remember, at least."

"She's a freshman? That's amazing! Everyone already expected Kawauchi-senpai to win 1st place, but this was quite an upset."

One of them seemed to be a contender. It's nice to hear Azuma and Airi getting complimented.

"Hey, hey, you're getting complimented, Sana-chan."

"The dawn of Sana-san's popularity is coming."

"S-Stop it!"

It's rare to see Azuma as the recipient of the teasing. I'm sure Ichihashi is enjoying her time.

Airi stared at them with a warm smile.

"I'm glad everything turned out great. I'm still hung up on the feeling of relief, to be honest. The fact that I placed 2nd hasn't sunk in yet."

"You deserve it, Airi. I'm sure Kawauchi-senpai will ask you to join the Photography Club again," said Haruka.

"You're finally going to join a club, Airi?" I asked.

"Well... I'm still not too sure."

"It's me, right? I already told you. You don't have to worry about me. We started off as a group of loners, remember? Being alone isn't a big deal for me. And I'll wait for you, so we can still go home together every day!" said Haruka.

"Mmmnnn..." Airi racked her brains like there was no tomorrow-- or at least, that's what it looked like-- but it seemed like both of

them already had this figured out. "Fine, I'll join. But that's only if they invite me, okay?"

"After this result, they'll be begging for someone like you to be in their club-- Oh-!" Haruka was surprised when Airi suddenly clung to her, but she was happy nonetheless.

"Kiyotaka-kun, do you know where Sotomura-kun is? I'd like to thank him personally. He's been a huge help for my improvement in the editing aspect," asked Airi.

"He's probably back in the dorms. I can go with you later."

"Thanks!"

Azuma and the other two had plans for Keyaki Mall, so our group split up after looking at the results.

"Goodbye, Sakura-chan! Ayanokouji-kun and Hasebe-san, too!"

"Thank you so much, Azuma-san! Maybe I'll ask for your help again in the future!" said Airi.

"No, thanks! You'll probably end up putting me on display again." Azuma's joke made Airi giggle.

"Congratulations again, Sakura-chan. You're a great photographer," praised Ichihashi.

"You should join these contests again. You'll surely win," added Ryuuko.

"N-No, no, no. I still have a lot to improve on."

"Thanks for hanging out with us, Ryuuko-chan. Say hi to Kyo-chan and the others for me!" waved Haruka.

Kyo-chan-- she must be referring to Kikyuu. That reminds me, it's been around a month since I've listened to her vent. Just a little more and she'll advance my plans soon enough.

"Sure! We'll be meeting up with them later, anyway."

"Goodbye to you, too, Azuma-san, Ichihashi-san." Haruka didn't ignore them this time. She even gave the two of them an affable goodbye.

"Yes. Thanks for letting us hang around, Hasebe-san. You too, Ayanokouji-kun. We'll be going now," said Ichihashi.

And with that, the first day of the 2nd semester ended without much issue. Being friends with the likes of Karuizawa, Shinohara, or even Matsushita is a bit of a stretch, but maybe Haruka could get along with the likes of Azuma or Ichihashi. She's probably starting to realize that those two aren't using Airi to get closer to me.

Of course, it's not like I can't understand where Haruka is coming from. Sometimes, you just don't wanna get involved with some people, and others need to respect that. It doesn't matter if you don't have bad blood with them or anything like that. There are just times when you can't be bothered with having them in your life. As long as you're not bothering them, I personally think there's nothing

wrong with that.

Vol. 5: Chapter 2.1 - Student #1100

"Sorry for the wait, everyone. We'll be distributing your points now. Those who won't receive anything can leave if they want to," announced Horikita. "Please form a line."

Kikuchi, Minami (Setsuya), and Sugawara went out of the classroom as a group. Club-goers like Ken, Akito, and Airi did the same and left the room after saying goodbye to me and Haruka.

Wait, Airi...? So she really did join the Photography Club. That's great.

Ryuuko also went out with Ishikura and Inogashira.

"Let's meet up later, okay?" Kikyou waved them goodbye.

Apparently, they were going to hang out at Keyaki Mall, but Kikyou and Mii-chan needed to get their points first. The three went ahead to secure a place.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. So you're in charge of giving us the money, huh?" Yamauchi greeted me with his usual grin.

He was currently the first one in line, sprinting to the front as soon as the last subject ended.

"Yep. I've registered with this ID already. Look at this." I showed him the screen of my phone.

"Holy shit!" Yamauchi flinched in surprise. "T-T-T-That's 7,000,000 private points!"

Everyone heard him, and the class got considerably excited.

"Calm down, everyone. You'll get your own respective points. Let's do this properly so there will be no complications." Hirata spoke as he posted a tally of how much each person will receive on the blackboard.

"There you go, Yamauchi. 125,000 points. Enjoy," I said.

"Ohh, thanks, man."

He scampered off to Ike, who was waiting for him. They'll probably stick around until Hondou and Miyamoto get theirs.

"Yo, Ayanokouji."

Speak of the devil.

"Oh, Hondou..." I swiftly gave him the points he was supposed to get. "There, 166,666 points."

"Thanks, dude."

"No problem. Congrats on getting your points."

Hondou put his hands inside his pockets and grinningly

approached Ike and Yamauchi. I then gave 166,667 points to Miyamoto who was next in line. They started chatting it out without a care in the world.

After a while, the line of people decreased and Kikyou finally got to me.

"It's the star of the day."

"Please don't call me that, Kiyotaka-kun..."

"I'm not exaggerating, though." I transferred the points to her with a *ding*. "1,000,000 points. Congratulations."

Our surrounding classmates gasped in awe. A million private points, just like that. It might be a small amount in the grand scheme of things, but it's still one million. Anyone would be envious.

"Woah, you're loaded, Kikyou-chan." Hondou approached Kikyou as she walked to her seat. "But remember our deal, okay? I'll be the one paying for tomorrow. You won't have to spend a single point."

"You really don't need to... But that's very kind of you, Ryoutarou-kun."

"It's fine, really. I owe you some goodwill, anyway. Just think of it as my way of saying thanks."

A lot of the girls started murmuring about their sudden conversation. *"Aren't they acting so friendly with each other, especially recently?"*, *"Are they going to have a date after school?"*, *"What's this about Hondou-kun paying for tomorrow?"*, *"Don't tell me... they're going out?"* Those were the questions I heard as I continued giving out everyone's private points.

Well, if they do end up dating, then at least Kikyou would have someone else she can share her burden with apart from me.

"Alright, sweet. Oh, by the way, you and Mii-chan are on your way to Keyaki Mall, right?" he asked.

"Yes, we're going to meet up with Kayoko-chan and the others," answered Kikyou.

"Why don't we all go together? Our group has some business in Keyaki Mall, too."

"We do?" asked the oblivious Yamauchi.

Apparently, he was unaware of this so-called "business".

"Yep. We just got more money and our daily supplies are running out. I'm planning to drop by the department store to stock up," he explained. "You guys are the same, no?"

"Now that I think about it, you're right," said Miyamoto.

"Ahh, I just remembered! I ran out of oil this morning!" added Ike.

Considering how close they are, it's probably safe to assume that their group would have similar shopping schedules and habits. That

was a smart deduction by Hondou if he thought it up on the fly.

"Let's go together, then. Is that alright, Mii-chan?" asked Kikyou.

"Mn," she nodded.

"Goodbye, everyone! Goodbye, Kiyotaka-kun!" Kikyou didn't miss giving us a farewell.

I could only respond with a weak wave as my work continued. Of course, I didn't fail to notice the extended stare that Hondou gave me before they left.

"Wow! That's 250,000 on my account! Thanks, Kiyopon!"

"Half of that belongs to Akito. Don't forget to give him his share," I said.

"I know! I'm not gonna take it for myself! Maybe..."

"Oi..."

"Ehehe... Well, don't worry about it." Haruka glanced at the door before looking back at me. "You'll stay behind with Horikita-san and the others, right? Should I go ahead?"

"Sure. We'll have lots of stuff to take care of like reporting everything to the teacher."

"Ooh, sounds like a pain. Welp, good luck to you guys. I'll be hanging out with Airi in their clubroom."

"Don't bother them too much."

"Fufun~! I'm quite close with Kawauchi-senpai, you know?"

I continued my job after Haruka left. Of course, it didn't take long until the last student was accommodated.

"166,667 points," I said.

"Thanks, Ayanokouji. Man, that was a hellish wait." Ueno looked fed up as he put his phone away.

The final student who received points was Ueno. While everyone stood in line, he just slumped on his chair like he usually does.

"Well, you didn't line up until the very last minute. Of course, you'd have to wait until everyone was done. Although in your case, waiting meant sleeping through the entire process."

"Lining up is a pain. I'm not energetic enough to try and compete with the likes of Yamauchi. Hell, there wasn't even a competition. He was already lined up before I could even move my ass up."

"I feel you, to be honest."

"Alright. I'm gonna go home and sleep. Goodbye to you guys."

"See you tomorrow, Ueno-kun." Hirata bid him farewell with a smile.

After he left, the remaining people inside the classroom were just me, Horikita, and Hirata. We had another purpose other than the one I told Haruka about. That's why we're waiting.

"For now, here's your 500,000 private points," I said.

I told Horikita and Hirata that a certain classmate wants to meet

them. I've pitched the general idea, and the two of them are willing to listen.

"So this mystery classmate wants to have a discussion with us, right? Are you sure about doing it in the classroom, Ayanokouji-kun? What if Ryuuen-kun finds out about it?" asked Horikita.

"Don't worry. Ryuuen nor his lackeys won't be spying on us today. I've been monitoring him the entire time. I would've moved the meeting to a later date if I caught him sniffing."

"Alright, that's reassuring," she replied.

"So this person holds a lot of the boys' private points, right?" Hirata asked.

"Yeah. He reached out to me not too long ago. You can consider him as our banker of sorts. Whether you'd work with him or not--you should decide that in this meeting."

After a short while, the sliding door opened and a lone boy entered the classroom.

"Ohh, so it's just the three of you."

"Ijuuin-kun...?" Horikita's reaction told us that she didn't expect Ijuuin, of all people, to show up.

I moved to the front-corner seat. Ijuuin sat in the middle front, directly facing Horikita and Hirata who were behind the podium. I'll be nothing but an observer for now.

"Ijuuin-kun, are you the one who wanted to meet us?" asked Hirata.

"That would be me, yes. I assume Ayanokouji-kun had given you a rundown of what I've been doing behind the scenes?"

"You're storing a large portion of some of the boys' private points, correct?" started Horikita.

"Yes. Although I haven't contacted Hirata-kun as he was a very high-profile person. I also didn't bother trying to negotiate with Kouenji-kun, so he's out of the picture, as well. The same goes for Ayanokouji-kun since he was a leader back then."

"So you're saying that the three of them are the only ones who haven't invested yet?"

"No, actually. There are four more-- Kanji-kun, Haruki-kun, Soshi-kun, and Ryoutarou-kun."

"That's pretty strange. They're your close friends, aren't they?" mused Hirata.

"Well, yes. But that's precisely why I kept them in the dark. I know how incompetent and immature they are, objectively speaking, so I cannot risk letting them in on this plan. They might start disputes or even accidentally leak the whole thing to other classes. You can never be too careful, especially with those four."

"But how are you so sure that the other boys can be trusted?"

asked Horikita.

"We've been in the same classroom as them, Horikita-san, for five whole months. You should have a grasp on our classmate's nature and habits. Apart from Kanji-kun's group of four, and Kouenji-kun, the other guys don't have the problematic attitudes that I'm worried about."

"How did you explain your plan to them, exactly?"

"It's pretty simple. On the surface, I'll be holding on to their private points. The grounds for their agreement were also simple. We have lots of excess private points, receiving way more than we could spend. Everyone who had invested agreed that it was better if someone kept everything in one place to prevent unnecessary spending. I've worked hard in gaining our classmates' trust which made the plan possible."

"To prevent unnecessary spending, is it? If that's what you're doing on the surface, then what's on the other side?"

"Emergency funds," he replied with a sigh. "There are still too many unknowns in this school's rules. I wanted to make an organized front in terms of managing our class's private points. You can consider it as *"insurance"* for those who have invested."

"Insurance, huh?"

"Our class is in a pretty awkward position, but it's a good position nonetheless. We're at the top thanks to the leaders' heavy-lifting, but we're still, in fact, the worst class overall. I couldn't really become a "banker" if we didn't have a bank-like amount of points, so I must thank Ayanokouji-kun for securing a large number of class points early on. It has tons of potential uses. One of which pertains to our written exams. I've already consulted Chabashira-sensei about it."

"100,000 private points for an exam point, right? We've done our research on it, too. It would be great if we knew about the consequences with regards to expulsion, but according to Chabashira-sensei, it's unlikely for us to get that information unless someone from our class gets expelled."

"As expected of you, Horikita-san. You can probably see where I'm going with this. Our class had the worst average during the final exam because we didn't have any tricks. More than a few students had near-failing grades, too."

We had the best average during the midterm exam because everyone only had to memorize the answers to the near-identical test questions Horikita and I got from a senior.

"Isn't your plan a bit counter-productive? If you're doing this with the investors in mind, then wouldn't you prioritize the students in the red, like Yamauchi-kun and the others? They wouldn't get the

so-called benefits if they're not included."

"It's not counter-productive at all. Sudou-kun, Okitani-kun, Kikuchi-kun, and some other boys are also struggling in academics and these points will be readily used for them if necessary. Unfortunately, those four are just an exception because keeping the plan's secrecy from other classes is a higher priority."

"I can't quite agree with this, Ijuuin-kun. Are you saying that Ike-kun and the others will be ignored if they fail their written exams?"

Ijuuin smiled and shook his head.

"I apologize if it sounded like I was planning to abandon them. I've already mentioned this exact scenario to the other guys. If any of the excluded ones cannot afford to pay for their own exam points, then I'll personally step in to help. I'll just loan them how much is needed without mentioning the plan."

"I see... So you've already thought this far ahead. That's amazing, Ijuuin-kun."

"How much do you have in store?" asked Horikita.

"Everyone had sent their contributions a bit earlier, so there's been a spike of private points in my account. But I've already calculated the amount in advance. The bank is currently worth 4,870,000 private points."

"I see... That much from just thirteen students, huh?" Horikita faced Ijuuin with a sharp look. "So, why did you decide to let us, the leaders, know about this now?"

"You could probably already guess what I'm after, Horikita-san."

"Pretty much. You want the girls to cooperate, correct?"

"Exactly. I'm glad we're on the same page."

"Yes, I'm pretty convinced. I agree with your plan," said Horikita. "How about you, Hirata-kun?"

"I agree, as well. Let us help you out, Ijuuin-kun."

"If it's convincing the girls, then Hirata-kun and I can probably make something happen."

"Thank you very much. Here's a list of the people I'd like to exclude." Ijuuin grabbed a piece of paper from his bag and handed it over to Hirata.

"Karuizawa-san, Sonoda-san, Rino-san, Maezono-san, Shinohara-san, Satou-san, Ishikura-san, Ichihashi-san, and Mori-san... That's nine. May I ask why you chose them in particular?"

"For the same reason that I excluded Kanji-kun and the others. Only two or three of them have problematic attitudes, in my opinion. But since they're all still friends, I cannot find them trustworthy as a group," he explained. "I know that it's quite hard to not involve someone like Karuizawa-san. She is the leader of Class A's girls, after all. I don't mind pitching her in if you can reason

with her, especially with keeping everything in secret."

"I'll try my best," said Hirata. "Karuizawa-san will surely cooperate."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Wait, Ijuuin," I called. "Ishikura should be part of Kikyou's friend group. Why did you exclude her?"

"Based on my recent observations, Ishikura-san has been hanging out with Karuizawa-san's group more and more. I think she's starting to slowly shift friend groups. Of course, I am also aware that she's still friends with Kushida-san and the others. We even saw her going out of the classroom with Nishimura-san and Inogashira-san earlier."

"Hmm... I guess that's fair."

"Anything else, Ijuuin-kun?" asked Horikita.

"There's still one last thing, actually. It's very important. You see, while I was out, I consulted Chabashira-sensei about a thing that you three currently possess."

"You must be talking about the Temporary ID," said Hirata.

"Yes. Chabashira-sensei said that we can do whatever we please with it. We can return it to the school or keep it for future use. The latter is needed for this plan to progress. Since transactions are very frequent, it's better for me to have an anonymous ID while doing it. I've already paid a hefty sum of private points to have the school remove all past transactions from my history."

"Deleting your transactions logs... You can't normally do that since there aren't any options for it in the app. So the school can do it for you as long as you pay for it with private points, huh?"

"Is that alright with you, Horikita?" I asked.

"Go ahead," she replied.

I wrote the username and password on a small piece of paper and gave it to Ijuuin.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. *"Student #1100"*, is it? I suppose that would be my new alias for from now on."

"I guess so."

"Well, that's all that I needed to say, Horikita-san, Hirata-kun. I'm glad we've come to an understanding," said Ijuuin.

"It's no problem. Thank you for involving us in this," replied Horikita.

I got up from my seat and grabbed my bag.

"By the way, Ijuuin. I finished the latest volume of the light novel you lent me. Do you have a new one to recommend?"

"I have lots! Let's go ahead and visit Professor's room."

With the discussion pretty much over, I decided to take my leave with Ijuuin in tow.

"Wait a minute, Ijuuin-kun. Can I ask you one last question?" Horikita's voice stopped us dead in our tracks.

"Hm? What is it, Horikita-san?"

"Were you really the one who thought of this plan?" she asked.

Hirata seemed surprised, but he didn't say anything.

"I see. It does make sense for you to have doubts."

"I'm not trying to be rude, but frankly speaking, I think Ayanokouji-kun is the one behind you in all of this."

"Really? Right to my face?" I retorted.

"Well? Spill the beans if I'm right or deny me if I'm wrong," she said.

"I've withdrawn from the class battles, Horikita. I don't have the time nor interest to organize something like this."

"Is that so?" While she didn't look convinced, Horikita didn't press any further. "Alright then. Sorry for jumping to conclusions."

"Sure."

After saying goodbye, Ijuuin and I left the classroom without any issue, leaving Horikita and Hirata behind. The two of them will remain to close everything up.

Ijuuin and I started talking after exiting the main building. The sun was already down, but the light posts brightened up our way to the dorms.

"Ugh... Horikita had been too exposed to my past schemes. I don't think it would've mattered whether I was the one behind you or not. I'm sure she'd still suspect me," I sighed.

Technically speaking, I was the one who made up the plan, so I *did* lie. But everything else about what I said was true.

"Ahaha. Well, you didn't totally deceive Horikita-san, did you? It is true that you no longer have any interest in managing this bank plan."

"Yeah, you tell 'em."

Ijuuin laughed as he raised his head and looked at the night sky.

"From now on, I'll be the one who'll manage everything without reporting them to you. You've really withdrawn from all of this, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah, I'm sure you and Professor can handle it. Of course, you can always tell me if it becomes a pain. I don't mind taking the managerial role again since I'm the one who pushed this onto you, anyway."

"I don't think that'll be the case. You gave us this role, so we'll take it seriously. And with the spice of keeping everything in secret, our boring high school lives just got more thrilling. I'm sure Professor thinks the same. We'll have to thank you for that."

"You're very much welcome. I'll take your recommendations as

thanks."

"Oh, sure. I have a good one for you."

And with that, Ijuuin started to ramble about an upcoming light novel written by his favorite author.

Author's Notes:

Kouenji got his 500,000 private points on his own.

Kiyotaka was in contact with Kikuchi. He was the one "monitoring" Ryuen that day.

Ijuuin Wataru, a new key player for Class A, Student #1100.

Vol. 5: Chapter 3.1 - Unguarded

One week passed and our class finally decided to discuss what kind of preparations we'll be having for the sports festival, which was about a month away.

Chabashira-sensei walked towards the back of the classroom after greeting us, probably with the intention of just silently watching. She said we could use our weekly homeroom however we wished, so this was the perfect time for Horikita and the others to discuss our strategy. Well, I say strategy, but given the nature of this event, options remain limited.

Our leader duo took the initiative and walked to the front.

"Fortunately, we only tackled basic physical training during our PE class last week. Before we start practicing for the actual competitions, we need to decide the specifics for our participation, like the order, or who the participants will be, especially for the recommended-participant events," explained Hirata.

"I've decided on what method would give us the biggest chance to win. We will be assigning our recommended participants based on their abilities," said Horikita. "If anyone is against this, the floor is open for better suggestions."

The class was silent. Some students started looking around, but in the end, no one spoke up against Horikita's proposed strategy. However, the frail-bodied students looked particularly worried.

"Now then, we'll have our most athletic students take part in all recommended-participant competitions. Of course, that's excluding Kouenji-kun." Horikita turned to the boy who was currently admiring his looks in front of a handheld mirror. "Is that alright with you?"

"Why, thank you, Horikita-girl. As you can see, I have no interest in this festival whatsoever. You people do what you like." Kouenji didn't even look at her as he responded.

"Yeah, we have no need for a freeloader like you," spat Ken.

"That's where you're wrong, Red Hair-kun. The word *"freeloader"* fits you and more than half of this class rather than someone as amazing as me," he replied.

"Hah?! You're the one who never cooperates! And you even fucked things up for us during the island exam!"

"Wrong again. A freeloader, in this context, would be

incompetent, thus becoming dead weight. There was never a case where I, the epitome of competence, had shown incompetence. Beneficial or not, I just did everything based on my desires. There is nothing in this school that I am incapable of doing or overcoming, unlike you."

Ken might've been our ace for this sports festival, but his extreme shortcomings in academics make him a setback during written exams. Meanwhile, Kouenji has never struggled in anything thus far.

"Who the hell cares about that?! The fact is you're a liability to this class unless you work with us, meaning *you're* dead weight."

Kouenji finally stopped looking at his reflection and gave Ken a side-eye.

"It seems like your brain cannot comprehend even the simplest things, Red Hair-kun. I do what I want whether you like it or not. That's what happened in the island exam *and* in the Zodiac exam. It's strange for you to leave that part out... Ah, of course. That's because I've coincidentally done something that benefited the class. Meanwhile, your mind was rotting the entire time because you can't figure anything out on your own," he snorted.

"The fuck did you say?!"

Kouenji was technically right, but instead of dragging us down by being incompetent, his neglectful actions are just straight-up destructive. But he was also right about having the ability to get results as long as he wanted to. Kouenji always had excellent grades in every subject, including PE. His stubbornness was probably the reason why he was originally placed in Class D despite his abilities.

Kouenji faced Horikita and Hirata who stood in the front.

"I will continue to act based on my mood. Whether my actions benefit the class or not, I couldn't care less. I think you already have a word for me, Horikita-girl. What was it again...? Ah, I remember-- a *"double-edged sword"*, correct?"

Horikita didn't respond, but her eyes visibly narrowed. Meanwhile, Kouenji went back to admiring his looks with his mirror.

"Hmph, I look forward to *"working"* with you lot. And by that, I mean letting me do as I please. Not that you can do anything even if you don't want me to."

"You bastard... Let's take this outside!"

After their exchange, Ken was ignored as if he was air. This pissed him off even more, so he stood up and started to approach Kouenji's seat.

"Sudou-kun, this isn't the time for that," Horikita immediately called out to him.

"But this bastard needs to be taught a lesson."

"That's fine, but do it after we're done here. You've already wasted a lot of our time, so please stay put for now. And if you're going to fight each other, do it somewhere hidden."

Horikita couldn't be bothered by their own personal conflicts. The only thing that matters right now was to move things forward. Her words were what I'd imagine Chabashira-sensei would say.

Ken could only click his tongue in frustration before facing Horikita.

"Hey, Horikita. I'll participate in everything. If anyone doesn't like the sound of that, you can meet me outside later on."

"We'll get to that later."

No one dared go against Ken when he was in this kind of mood. Well, no one except Akito.

"Don't go picking fights with your classmates, you idiot." Akito scolded Ken without batting an eye.

"Hah?" Of course, Ken was displeased by his words.

"Your quarrel with Kouenji is over and we're all being cooperative right now. Stop intimidating everyone with your hostile attitude."

Ken's eyes darted around for a bit before groaning in annoyance.

"You're being too heated, Kencchin. Just listen to Horikita-san for now." Haruka joined in with a gentle voice.

Ken glanced at the worried Airi and then at me before finally realizing that he was getting unnecessarily worked up.

"Tsk... My bad," he said, sitting down once more.

The class had not witnessed Ken's rage again since our first days. It was only thanks to Akito and the members of the Ayanokouji Group that his nature was kept in check. But now, Kouenji's provocations quickly popped a nerve.

"Thank you. Now then, I have a list of nominees for the people who would be in the recommended-participant competitions."

Ken was still in a foul mood, but he chose to shut up and listen to Horikita. The meeting finally started making progress.

"These are all based on the scores I've filed from your physical fitness and abilities during PE class, in no particular order. According to the date, Sudou-kun, Ayanokouji-kun, Hirata-kun, Miyake-kun, Makida-kun, and Minami Setsuya-kun are the most of athletic boys in our class."

"Sounds good to me," Minami said with a smirk.

"For girls, there's Onodera-san, Kushida-san, Maezono-san, Matsushita-san, Ichihashi-san, and myself."

"E-Ehh... I can't believe I got in..." Maezono felt noticeably conflicted.

"We'll be drafting two to three students per event before deciding

on the final roster. The recommended nominees will compete for their spots while the class improves their physical abilities. Everything will be decided based on the results of our upcoming training. Hirata-kun and I have decided to push the creation of our participant list to the very last day."

"In other words, we'll optimize our roster to the very limit. Horikita-san said that it'll give us the biggest chance of winning. I wonder if everyone agrees?"

"Please feel free to give us suggestions."

Our classmates started murmuring among themselves.

"What they're saying makes sense."

"I guess Horikita-san's strategy would be for the best."

"Yeah... I don't really wanna compete against better guys in the recommended-participant competitions."

Karuizawa raised her voice and addressed the duo in the front.

"Isn't this fine? You and Yousuke-kun have already done the brainy stuff for us. I'm okay with just following the lead as long we win. And I'm sure we'll have a plan for those who are gonna suck. Right?"

"That's true..."

"Like, I don't really wanna think about it too much."

"Yeah, we don't really have anything to complain about at this point."

"We'll just have to do our best and place as high as possible, right?"

She rallied the girls which in turn rallied the rest of our classmates who looked unsure.

When the meeting continued, the three members of the previous exam's Dog Group were assigned to pay up in case we needed a substitution. And for extremely unathletic students like Professor and Airi, measures have been placed in case of the worst. We, of the Dragon Group, were assigned to cover for their lack of exam points in case they come off short. Of course, our help will still be very limited due to how expensive each point is.

Ultimately, the choices were sifted and I ended up getting drafted for the Mixed-Gender Three-Legged Race. Of course, some of my classmates asked Horikita why I'm only competing in one recommended-participants event, but she argued about my lack of stamina which I confirmed myself.

Of course, this was all scripted so I won't have to get as involved. We're already bound to participate in at least eight events, anyway. One more should be enough for someone like me.

That said, something was a bit weird about my nomination for that event...

"Does anyone else from the guy-nominees want to try for the Three-Legged Race?" asked Hirata.

"I'm good. Kiyotaka's got this," answered Ken.

The rest of the guys also went silent.

On the other hand, all six girls tried for the spot of being my partner. Some non-nominees even jokingly raised their hand trying to volunteer themselves. Because of that, I have once again become the object of the boys' dagger-like glares.

After Horikita and Hirata took some opinions from the likes of Yukimura, Kikyou, Ryuuko, and a few other classmates, our first rough meeting had finally come to a close.

"Well done, Horikita. It seems like you're shaping up to be a great leader. Of course, my praise extends to you, Hirata." Chabashira-sensei complimented them on the way out.

"I'm still lacking, Sensei. I can't be compared to Ayanokouji-kun just yet."

"Thank you for your praise, Chabashira-sensei. We'll do our best to meet everyone's expectations."

Horikita's plan truly showcased her will to win. She'd fully taken advantage of Ken and the other athletic students' strengths. One can say that her offense was sharp and airtight. Horikita's strategy was almost perfect.

If not for the gaping hole in her defense.

Author's Notes:

The main reason Shinohara, Ike's group, and some of the girls went against Horikita's plan in the canon was the lack of private points. However, being in Class A with an overabundance of monthly allowance, no one was really concerned about that aspect of the rewards, especially since they aren't that big in comparison to the rewards from the first two special exams.

Vol. 5: Chapter 3.2 - The Perfect Choice

"Kikyou-chan is hanging out with Hondou-kun again. Are you lonely?"

"Why would I be?"

"Oh, you. It's okay to be honest, you know? Your *Onee-san* is here to lend you a shoulder."

"You're just a few months older than me... But I guess you're still technically right."

"Yup, yup. So I'm all ears if you want someone to talk to."

I noticed Kikuchi and Mori walking together, but not in the direction of the dorm. I wonder if they're going on an after-school date.

"I told you already, I'm not sad or lonely or anything like that. And Kikyou aside, I'm actually quite glad about everything that's happening so far, especially with my increasing obscurity," I sighed. "Not that it shows on my face."

"Oh yeah?" Matsushita narrowed her eyes and closed in towards me with an eyebrow raised. "Is that why you and Horikita-san lied about earlier?"

"Ohh..."

Well, it's not like I expected anyone to truly believe that reason.

"You literally scaled mountains and forests during the island exam at frightening speeds. Some might not have been aware of that, but a lot of us were. There's no way you'd run out of stamina in a sports festival," she said.

"I know, and I'm sure Horikita knows that as well. I guess it was part of her plan."

Both of us knew how flimsy that excuse was, but I decided to play along.

"Hehh... Is that so? I wanna guess what her plan is. Can you give me a hint?" Matsushita smirked as her interest was piqued.

"Let's see... It's all about '*me*', in a sense."

"That's pretty vague, but it doesn't go against my theory..." Matsushita put on a thinking pose as she walked. "I see... I think I got it."

"Oh yeah? Fire away, then."

"Horikita was testing the class, wasn't she?"

"Right on the money. As expected of you," I said.

"I kept thinking about it earlier. I really wanted to raise my hand in retaliation because there's no way that you, of all people, would lose in terms of stamina compared to anyone in our year-- maybe even in the entire school."

"Surely, that's an exaggeration."

"Is it, now?" she smirked.

"Whatever. Just proceed with your explanation."

Matsushita giggled before continuing.

"Anyway, I observed Horikita-san's face it seemed like she was *gathering* information rather than *giving* them. It was after she made you confirm your "lack of stamina" in front of everyone. The way she scrutinized us was quite apparent in hindsight."

"What kind of test was she doing, in your opinion?"

"It's not just an opinion anymore. I'm confident that it's an absolute fact." Matsushita put on a serious expression as she spoke. "Horikita-san wanted to know how much we trust your words."

"Hmm... I see. You're probably right."

"I mean, what else could it be? To be honest, I was also fascinated with how fast our classmates just accepted the fact you're suddenly less resilient than what you've shown us back then. They really trust you, almost blindly."

Matsushita can be haughty sometimes, but she really does have a sharp instinct.

Karuizawa, Horikita, Kikyuu... They possess amazing abilities, but they also come with their own respective drawbacks.

On the other hand, Matsushita can probably do what they can without any risk, or at least, none that I'm currently aware of. If I think about it logically, she'd be the perfect choice as an accomplice for any potential plans. In other words, a perfect partner in crime.

Of course, I wouldn't really have to think about that right now, given my current position and goal. If anything, I can just think of Matsushita as the kind of person she is to me right now-- a friend.

I stayed silent while Matsushita continued to gather her thoughts.

"Wait-! Is that the reason why you stepped down-? Because you don't want the class to be overly dependent on you? So they can stand on their own?" she suddenly sprang up with vigor.

"Woah there, Ms. Conspiracy Theorist. Calm down for a second."

"Ah- Hehe, my bad. I kinda got excited there for a moment."

"It's fine. You've always been like that."

"N-No, I'm not!"

The answer was yes and no. Matsushita Chiaki was always the elegant and mature girl in the class like Ichihashi and Ryuuko. She was also mysterious like Horikita but in a different way. That's just how she is around other people. However, that couldn't be further

from the truth when it's just the two of us.

"Sorry, but I'm often exposed to your adventurous side, so I can't even tell anymore."

"Ehh... I guess so," Matsushita shrugged it off in the end and smiled as if it couldn't be helped.

You could say that she was the opposite of me. I yearned for a normal high school life without much conflict-- a peaceful paradise where I can either keep to myself or hang out with friends. Matsushita could do that very easily, but she'd already experienced that kind of life during her middle school days.

As we grow older, we think of the future, our stability, and following our path in life. Matsushita wasn't an exception to that.

"But wouldn't it be thrilling? Having layers upon layers of tactics in your plans... Isn't that just so cool?"

But right now, she wants to live in the moment. After entering this high school and experiencing things as gripping as special exams and class rankings, a new desire was born inside of her. The competitive nature of our class battles was made for students with abilities to show off, like her.

That's especially true for someone of Matsushita's intellect. She was an expert in assessing people and drawing out answers from them. Her scholastic abilities, physical abilities, and social abilities are all excellent. There's no way that a life of normalcy in this kind of environment will satisfy her.

We're similar in the sense that we both dislike trouble, but unlike me, Matsushita was a bit more ambitious with graduating in Class A, especially since we actually have a solid chance of doing so.

"Thrilling, huh? I guess you hate being bored."

"It's not that simple, you know? If this were a normal high school, then I'm fine doing my typical honor student schtick. But this school is a lot more fun."

Matsushita looked ahead as the sunset slowly came upon us. The breeze was slowly starting to get cold.

"I see. Then you'd have to do your best in assisting Horikita and Hirata. I'm sure they're counting on you, too."

"It depends on what kind of assistance they require. I'm honestly tired of getting excessively relied on for our classmates' studies and whatnot. I wonder if hiding my abilities early on was a better move..."

Matsushita was on the fence back during the first semester, but I destroyed her cover when she tried to tease me. She was known as a smart student from then on.

In other words, it's partly my fault that she's forced to work hard for the class. But to be honest, she can just back out whenever she

wants. Her place in the class hierarchy is pretty high, after all.

I know Matsushita won't leave her current post just like that, though. She needs to maintain the reputation she's built up.

"Ahh, we're here. Man, I'm so tired."

"Same..."

The two of us immediately got inside the elevator.

"You'll probably get spent a lot more starting next week."

"That's true," she sighed. "But get it together with your stuff in the festival, okay? You said you run really fast, so use it for the final race. I'm sure you'll lap over those slowpokes."

"Yeah, yeah. Nothing was final with what we discussed earlier, anyway. Everything can still be changed depending on how we do during practice."

"Of course..." The elevator door opened as we reached the 4th floor. Matsushita yawned lightly while waving her hand. "See you tomorrow, Ayanokouji-kun."

After arriving inside my room, I checked the notifications from messages and spotted Kikyou's name.

"She's getting really stressed out," I muttered.

Apparently, she's bottled up a lot of unpleasant emotions over the course of a month.

Holding out for this long might be considered good progress, but I'll have to lend her an ear as soon as possible. I gave her some reassurance and promised to hear her out tomorrow.

Vol. 5: Chapter 4.1 - The Grip Test

"Woohoo! More free time!" celebrated Ike.

Since there was a lot to do before the sports festival, our physical education classes would be used for practice from here on out, too. And that's exactly how we're going to spend our time from now on.

"Please line up. We'll be looking at everyone's current physical strength with a couple of tests," announced Hirata.

He submitted a request in advance and managed to procure a device for measuring grip strength. We're about to fill in our roster for the recommended-participant competitions.

"I borrowed two of these so we can split the class in half and save time. Yukimura-kun and I will be recording the results."

The boys casually made two lines of nine and ten, courtesy to Kouenji's unresponsiveness.

"What's that, Ayanokouji?" asked Kikuchi, who was lined up behind me.

"A measuring instrument?"

"I know that, dude... I'm just curious if you know the specific name for it. You look like someone who does." His all-knowing smirk is annoying and scary at the same time.

"What kind of judgment is that...?" I sighed before addressing Hirata. "Hey, Hirata. What's that device called?"

"This...? I actually don't know," he answered.

"Hmm. What unit does it use?" I asked.

"Oh, let's see... It's kilograms."

"Alright, thanks."

"Why do you ask?"

"Kikuchi was asking about it for some reason."

Kikuchi beamed at him while making a peace sign.

"Oi, Kiyotaka! I'll go first. That okay?"

Ken approached us with a scary look on his face.

"Uh, sure... Go ahead."

Yukimura's line started measuring their grip strength along with us. I faced Kikuchi, who was still waiting for an answer.

"You heard the man. The name of that device will be a mystery unless we ask someone who knows."

Kikuchi scoffed at me and shook his head.

"Hahaha, c'mon now. Don't me take for an idiot, Ayanokouji. You

know what it's called, don't you?" he chuckled. "I know because you let your curiosity get the best of you."

This is why I hate talking to clever guys. I'm getting the same vibe as that bespectacled student council president from him. Just a bit more annoying.

"I see. I thought you wouldn't notice."

Kikuchi only shrugged his shoulders in response.

"It's a Jamar Dynamometer. It's pretty common."

"I knew I could count on you." He laughed while patting my shoulder.

He looked like he didn't even need the answer in the first place. This guy...

"Woah, 57.3 kilograms? You're strong, Sestu!"

"I think that's pretty average," Minami replied.

"Hmph, I'll put that record in its place. Watch this, Minami. Uraaah!" The competitive Ken wouldn't let Minami hog the spotlight.

His shoulders trembled as he tightly squeezed the device in his right hand. The numbers on the digital readout spiked in an instant. 50 kg... 60 kg... 70 kg... 80 kg... In the end, the measurement of his grip strength was displayed for everyone to see.

"82.4 kilograms?!"

"What the heck, dude? You're stupidly strong!"

"Ohh! As expected of Sudou!"

The boys got hyped up after Ken's show of strength.

"Heh, it's just 'cause I train all the time. Only natural."

He faced Kouenji with an arrogant expression.

"Hey, c'mon. You do it, Kouenji." Ken displayed his score at him with a provocative tone.

"I'll pass. Ignore me."

The guy was currently polishing his fingernails with a relaxed smile. He did even look at Ken as he blew on them.

"What? Ya scared of losin' to me or somethin'?" He was clearly trying to stir him up, but Kouenji wasn't biting.

"Tch..."

"Good job on stopping there," I patted his shoulder.

"That guy pisses me off to no end, but I'm better than talking to a brick wall."

Apparently, Ken got scolded by Akito yesterday. It almost escalated into a fight, but Haruka and Airi were there to stop them. I'm glad he's restraining his anger now.

"On that note, *you'll* be my competitor, Kiyotaka! Take this seriously or I'll kill you." Ken shoved the device into my hand.

"I know, I know..."

I glanced at the girls who were currently recording their 100-meter dash speeds which will be used as their basis for the Three-Legged Race and the final relay. From what I can see, Horikita and Kikyou were the ones doing the documentation.

The boys behind me were looking at the device in anticipation.

"C'mon, Ayanokouji!"

"Beat Sudou's record!"

"Ayanokouji should be really strong, but he told us that speed was his specialty. And besides, Sudou is jacked. It's a close fight, but Sudou will probably take home the victory."

Hondou's explanation would've been the perfect camouflage. Even if I didn't know the average grip strength of a boy my age, I can at least score below Ken. Unfortunately, I've made a terrible blunder in the past.

Ken was currently giving me a hawk-eye's glare. He knew I was stronger than him in both power and grip strength, so it didn't seem like I can afford to feign weakness on this one...

"I see..."

"I guess that makes sense."

"Sudou *does* look like the more powerful guy."

"What do you think, Sudou?" asked Miyamoto.

"Just shut up watch," he spat.

And with that, everyone turned to me with a silent stare.

"Good grief..." I started gripping the device as I sighed. "Alright, Ken. I'm going all out, or even beyond that. I'll give this everything I've got. So much so that I'll probably never surpass the score that I'm gonna get here."

My sudden vigor surprised a lot of my classmates. It wasn't really on my character, but I needed to make that kind of show to make them believe that I'm going all out. Ken looked like he bought my act after he smiled and nodded.

"Ohh! Go for it, Ayanokouji!"

"Beat him!"

"Damn... I just looked it up, and apparently, the average grip strength of a high school boy is 42.5 kilograms..."

"Sudou really put a high bar."

I gripped the device with a noticeably agitated grimace, giving them the impression that I'm pouring all of my strength into it.

"Ohh! He's doing it!"

"This is insane!"

I stared at the device as the score went up from 79 kg to 80 kg. After doing some microadjustments, I released my hand and scored a nice 82.9 kg.

"Holy shit! He actually did it!"

"How was that even possible?!"

"Are you a god, Ayanokouji?!"

I heaved a big sigh as if I was out of breath.

"Phew..."

Ken walked towards me and suddenly grabbed the device.

"Oi, oi, Sudou. Don't get too pissed now. It was a fair and square fight, you know?" teased Ike.

That normally resulted in a death sentence, but Ken's focus was on my score.

"Hmm... Did you really go all out?" he said, looking skeptical.

"Yeah, I did. You think I'd get that score otherwise? I even felt my flesh and bones start to tear apart," I replied.

"What are you talking about, Sudou?"

"Kiyotaka beat me in an arm wrestling match-- *easily*. Of course, I'd be surprised if our gap isn't that wide."

"What?!"

"He beat *you* in arm-wrestling?!"

The boys erupted in instant. Even the other line started to scatter towards us after hearing that.

"I told you, it's my technique. That's what matters when you're up against someone of similar strength," I explained.

"Well, I guess so..."

My excuses made sense, but I'm starting to dislike the current atmosphere.

"Everyone, let's move on with it, please." After recording my result, Hirata finally came to my rescue.

I hung out with Ken and the other guys who finished first. The girls were done with their test, too.

"Hey, Ayanokouji. Can you pass this on to Ike over there? He and Yamauchi are the only ones left in our line. Well... if you exclude Kouenji." Ueno gave me the device with a listless look.

It didn't seem like he was thrilled about this whole thing. I feel him.

"Sure."

I walked toward the two who were busy chatting it out.

"Are you okay, Mori-san? You look really pale."

"I-I'm okay... Just a bit tired, I guess."

"Let's line up, Sana-chan."

"Wait a minute, my shoelace is untied."

I passed by a bunch of girls who were doing their own things.

"How was it, Kikyuu-chan?"

"Oh, it was alright. Everyone did their best."

"Ehh. How about you? Did you place well?"

"Fortunately, yes. I think I got lucky, though."

"Pfft, you're being humble again. We all know how athletic you are."

On the way, I also heard Hondou chatting casually with Kikyou. It seems like it went well on their end. Now that I think about it, I can't afford to hold back in this next test either...

"Ike, Yamauchi, take this and get your measurements. Then get Hirata to record your results."

"Ohh, is everyone done now?"

"Alright, it's my time to shine! Let's do this Haruki!"

They seem pretty excited. I hope they don't rig their results, though, not that Hirata would let that happen. I planned to walk away, but Ike suddenly called out to me.

"Huh? Hey, Ayanokouji! How do you reset this thing? I think it's broken," he said.

"Yeah, it's broken. It says 126.3 kilograms on the display. How do you put it back to zero?" asked Yamauchi.

"Ahh, it's not broken. Maybe there's a bug on the display. Just restart the entire device. There should be a button for it at the top," I replied.

"Ohh, I think it's this button... Yep, it is. Thanks dude."

I should probably start warming up. I can see the other guys do so, as well.

Author's Notes:

Kiyotaka originally didn't know the specific name of the device, so he had to ask Hirata what unit it uses to know whether it was a Jamar Dynamometer (kilograms) or a Martin Vigorimeter (kilopascals). Of course, Kikuchi took note of that fairly easily and concluded that Kiyotaka did indeed know what it was. He wouldn't have noticed it if Kiyotaka didn't let his curiosity get the best of him, as Kikuchi had stated.

Vol. 5: Chapter 4.2 - The Sprinting Test

"Thanks, Hirata-kun." Horikita took the two devices and faced the girls. "Alright. Before we do the grip test, I want everyone to rest up and regain their strength."

The girls started withdrawing to the side of the athletic grounds. The boys started lining up for the sprinting test. For that, we will do a simple 100-meter dash, just like the girls.

"How are the results, Hirata?" asked Ken.

"Ah, Sudou-kun. Well, it didn't really change much after you and Ayanokouji-kun set the standards."

He then showed us the complete record.

"Geh... You guys are weak," he said.

"Well, compared to the two of you, I guess we are," smiled Hirata.

"That's a ridiculously large gap between the top two and the rest of us..." muttered Yukimura.

"Hehe. How does it feel, Yukimura? To be finally below us at something?" Ike teased Yukimura as he put his arm around his shoulder.

Yamauchi was beside him, wearing the same smug expression.

"I couldn't care less. I'm aware of my own strengths and weakness," he replied, removing Ike's arm.

"You're seriously celebrating that?" Akito left them a contemptuous comment before lining up.

"Isn't that pretty lame, Ike and Yamauchi?" Now they're the ones getting teased-- by Kikuchi, no less?

He then muttered under his breath.

"Anything just to inflate those pathetic little egos, huh?"

Failing to hear his next words, the two continued to retaliate.

"H-Hey, you gotta celebrate every win, right? No matter how small!"

"That's right!"

Well, it's rare for them to get a win in general. Especially against the number one student in class in terms of academics.

I got in line and noticed the increasing frequency of someone's glances.

"I wasn't even using my full strength," said Yamauchi.

"Off with your excuses, Haruki. You're just weak. Same for you, Ryoutarou!" countered Ike.

"It was literally half a kilogram. I didn't even try," Hondou replied.

"Shut up, you three. You didn't even come close to mine," followed Miyamoto.

"Now that I think about it, I'm surprised you were that strong, Soshi."

"Maybe you were gripping so hard that some poop came out?"

Okitani and Onizuka joined in on their conversation.

"Alright, alright, line it up. Let's get this over with!" Sudou yelled and took the lead with Hirata.

The boys warmed up and started getting ready. We were assigned to use the athletic grounds that weren't adjacent to the main building, so we didn't have to worry about getting spied on. It was the perfect time to decide on the Recommended Participants roster. That was the case for every class during the first week of preparation.

"Is everything good over there, Yukimura-kun?" asked Hirata.

"Yeah, I'm ready to go," Yukimura answered, holding the stopwatch.

"Kiyotaka, let's compete!" yelled Ken.

"I'm actually going to pass this time. I don't feel like running," I replied before approaching Hirata. "I'll be around the water station if you wanna look for me."

"Alright. See you later."

I walked toward the drinking area and refreshed myself. I waited for a short minute before seeing someone else come around.

"Hey, Kikyou. It's been a while."

"Kiyotaka-kun..." She slowly walked in my direction before speeding it up to a jog.

Kikyou hugged me, but her expression went dark.

"It's really been a while, huh?"

"I feel so heavy... I wanted to release all of my emotions long ago, but I couldn't risk it. I'm glad I waited for you."

"I'm sorry for not being there for you when you needed it. This place is pretty dangerous, but it doesn't seem like you can't take any more stress to wait until classes end."

"I can't... I can't anymore." Kikyou buried her head into my chest.

It wasn't like she was crying, but I could tell that her frustrations had gotten to her.

"It's alright. You can tell me everything."

The water station was on the right side of Gymnasium #2 while the grounds we were using stood on the opposite side. Since we have a whole gymnasium's worth of distance between us and everyone else, Kikyou insisted that I listen to her right here and

now.

I expected her to take a long time picking apart who she wants to talk about, but her main source of stress didn't really involve other people... It was her own internal struggle.

"I kept thinking about it, Kiyotaka-kun... On and on..." she said. "Can I really change? Is that even possible with who I am?"

Kushida Kikyou was the angelic idol of Class A and my devilish best friend. For her, she should be the center of everything, and she loves the attention given to her. She looks down on everyone and thinks ill of them behind their backs. However, I'm the only one who knows that, if I don't count the disinterested Horikita. On the outside, she was one of, if not, the most popular girl in our year. She was a role model, excelling in both athletics and academics. And in terms of appearance, she was among the cutest. But her most notable attribute was her ability to communicate. In terms of social connections, no one can probably top Kikyou. She was friends with everyone in our year and acquainted with almost every student in the school. And she's extremely popular with the boys. She easily managed to achieve all of that despite her true nature.

In other words, she shows one thing while hiding another, and says one thing while thinking another. Hypocritical, two-faced, cruel, poisonous-- you can describe her with a lot of denouncing words. If you're aware of her true nature, you could only agree.

However, the most interesting thing about Kikyou was her ability to be rational and meticulous about having this mindset. Her traits weren't unique in any way. In fact, someone like her is pretty common in society. They think of themselves as the main character of the world, acting nice while looking down on others to get that sweet sense of superiority, inflating their "pathetic little ego", from Kikuchi's words. They think they're the smartest person in the room, constantly trying to one-up anyone who takes the spotlight in their headspace.

"Pfft, what an idiot. What is this person even saying?" they might think towards someone who's taking the lead.

Afraid of direct confrontation, their scornful scoffs are only found inside their minds. However, their nature is often exposed online. Arguments on the internet lay everything bare. These people are innately pretentious and prideful. Anonymity gave everyone the freedom to be as arrogant as they want, and you can often see online arguments flooded with these kinds of people. For them, it's not about reaching an understanding. It's about being the winner-- the "smartest" one in the thread, which they most likely aren't.

Kushida Kikyou was similar in a sense, but she wasn't as pitifully obvious.

She may have used the internet as an outlet for her true feelings, but it was her only way to vent. And she may have used her supporters to validate her hateful feelings but she didn't argue nor converse with anyone. She just relayed her stories.

The most terrifying thing about Kikyou was her undying resolve for her way of living. This allowed her to continually keep her true nature hidden from the eyes of the world. Pair that with her cunning and intelligence and you get the school's current freshman idol-- the perfect girl that everyone wants to befriend.

However, everything changed after she met me.

Despite not being in the same middle school, I managed to uncover and learn about her past. It was all thanks to Horikita's initial warning. I continued being her best friend, even after her true nature was exposed to me. It opened up new possibilities for Kikyou.

"Maybe having an ally was possible," she may have thought.

Kikyou knew my abilities firsthand. She was smart enough to conclude that opposing me was the wrong move. Therefore, the two of us continued being involved with each other as "best friends". After all, we were both beneficial to each other. She would lend me her power and I'll keep her secret safe while advancing the class.

Her train of thought eventually evolved.

"Should I start opening up to other people?"

The possibility of total change was unlocked, but it wasn't that easy. Kikyou had been the condescending and conceited narcissist ever since she was a child. Being a genuinely kind person on the outside *and* on the inside wasn't a feat that anyone who shared the same circumstances can achieve over the course of a few weeks.

"Do you want to change?"

That question made everything clear to Kikyou, and that's precisely why I asked it. Her face started to make a grim expression.

"You still look down on problematic people like Ike, Yamauchi, Shinohara, or Karuizawa. But as you said before, there isn't anything nasty that you can say about your other friends like Inogashira, Mii-chan, or Ryuuko."

"Yes..."

"Saints don't exist, and I'm sure you know that. Insulting someone in your mind while giving them compliments is common for anyone. It's all about selecting who is who. I personally think it's okay... But that's not what this is about, is it?"

Hearing that, I felt Kikyou shiver.

"You lied about your thoughts on your friends. You lied to me,

but you also lied to yourself. You look down on them as much as you look down on others. No one's an exception, not even me."

"Hehe..." she chuckled in response. "Ahh... This tone of yours. Other people wouldn't be able to notice anything, but I certainly can. The person that's hugging me right now... is the Kiyotaka-kun that instilled fear into me that night."

Kikyou slowly removed herself from my embrace and looked up to me, wearing a relieved smile.

"You really do understand me."

With those words, I can probably assume that I was right.

"I've been your best friend for almost half the school year now. Anyone in my position would end up with the same evaluation."

"Is that so?" Kikyou couldn't care less about that response and immediately went back on topic. "This is what I'm struggling with... and I can barely take it anymore."

As expected, her pained look earlier wasn't an act.

"I've never doubted my ability to survive alone. Even with things like the class competitions, this school was not any different. Graduating in Class A was a nice goal, but more than that, I want my high school life to be as fun as my elementary and middle school days. I was gonna go about my own thing without getting found out."

Someone of her caliber can make that happen.

"But everything changed after I saw Horikita-san on that bus. I couldn't have someone who knows my past be on the same school. I will never be at peace." Kikyou grinned at me as she spoke. "And then there's you. Just like Horikita-san, you're aware of my true nature. But even worse, you know about the entirety of the incident. Logically speaking, you should be the number one person on my hitlist."

We've talked about this before, but Kikyou was rattled with the idea of me leaving.

"You should've been... but I became dependent on you. You propelled the class forward with your abilities, and you became an outlet for my frustrations. An irreplaceable existence-- that's what you are to me now. Call it friendship or alliance or whatever, but this was the first time that I thought about coexisting with a person that knows who I truly am. And because of your reassurance, I decided to stop going after Horikita-san no matter how much I wanted to expel her."

"And so? Why are you telling me all this?"

What does it have to do with her internal struggle? Well, I may have decided to ask that question, but I already knew the answer right from the start. Her next words could only confirm it.

"Because before changing myself... I first thought about changing sides."

"Changing sides, huh? So in the end, you decided against that idea. That's why you're revealing everything to me, now, right?"

"Yes. If I did go through with it, I would've tried to temporarily betray the class. I might have conspired with Ryuen-kun or Sakayanagi-san in order to expel you and Horikita-san."

"I see... That would've been the correct move if you wanted to get rid of us. Why didn't you go through with it?"

"It did go with a bunch of setbacks. My true nature will be revealed to my accomplice, and I'll have no one to vent my feelings to. And without you, this class is doomed, so I'll need to work hard in order to save 20 million private points for a class exchange."

"I understand what you're saying, and I'm glad you didn't betray us," I said, locking eyes with her. "After all, it would be a loss to the class if you were suddenly expelled."

Kikyou stiffened for a brief moment before chuckling.

"Please don't say such scary things, Kiyotaka-kun. I can actually see that happening, you know? That's why I decided to keep myself in check. I don't see anyone in this school who can match up with your abilities. I'd rather suck it up than force you and Horikita out of the school."

"Smart move, because even if you wanted to, you won't be able to do it."

"In hindsight, I guess you're right. It's just the reality of things. Someone will always be higher than you," Kikyou stretched her body with a moan. "Let's go back to your main question then. Do I want to change?"

By change, Kikyou was most likely talking about her mindset.

"Heehee..." she giggled. "That option was only possible because I sided with you. If I betrayed you and the class, I wouldn't even have thought of it. It's been eating away at me for a while now. I can't take it anymore."

"Looks like it. You should probably decide now."

"I've thought about it for a while, so I'll give you the gist of it to keep everything brief. The main reason why I'm like this is the fact that I need to act like a perfect girl in front of everyone, including trash like Ike-kun. It's stressing and I wound up getting swallowed by hate..."

Hate that spreads even towards her closest friends.

"If I try to change, then that would mean I'd get rid of my act. The stress would disappear, but I'll eventually stop getting as much attention."

"And people will eventually suspect your initial self as a fake if

you change. Your reputation won't just stagnate. It's possible for it to deteriorate, as well," I added.

"Yeah, that too... Sigh..."

So this is what's been bugging her for a long time now. It's certainly not an easy decision to make especially after she's come this far. And it'll only get worse the more Kikyou tries to delay it.

"Ahhh!" Kikyou stretched once more but with a yell this time. "I feel a lot better now."

"But you haven't even decided yet."

"It's annoying, but I'll think about it more. Sharing everything with you was more important. I've been extremely stressed thinking about potentially betraying you and stuff. It was pretty nerve-racking. Depending on my decision, everything I've built up might end up falling apart," she explained.

As Kikyou had said earlier, I've instilled a certain amount of fear inside her. The thought of going against me might've triggered some of the memories from that night, and her anxiety just kept on building up.

"We can continue talking in a more private place. The heavy feeling in my chest is gone now..." said Kikyou. "Now I can truly call myself your ally. I won't betray you any time soon."

"So you'll do so in the future?"

"If someone capable of expelling you comes around, then I might consider it." Kikyou's cute smile didn't match her words.

"I see. I guess that's reasonable."

"Are you kidding? I doubt anyone like that exists. At least, not in this school. Well, even if that's the case, I don't think I'll be able to scheme anything without you knowing about it already," she smirked. "I'll be on your side until the very end, so I want you to protect my high school life, too..."

"That was my plan from the start. Nothing has really changed."

A valuable piece and an important friend. That's what Kikyou was to me, and that's probably what she thinks she is as long as she's on my side. I guess that's true to some extent, but that'll depend on how useful she is. If Kikyou's abilities weren't proportional to the position I've given her, then she's as disposable as anyone else.

Author's Notes:

There wasn't actually any sprinting test-- at least for Kiyotaka.

Vol. 5: Chapter 4.3 - To Prevent a Disaster

"So that was your issue, huh...? I'm surprised you're not that stressed about anyone right now," I said.

"Oh, I am! But I'm somehow managing it. I guess it's not as bad as before. During elementary and middle school, my peers were a lot more unreasonable because we were young. For the most part, I can brush off the perverts and immature ones with a simple sigh. Some of them still get on my nerves, though."

Kikyou will be a reliable ally for the rest of my days here, so the recordings I have against her have lost most of their value now. In fact, they might become a liability if an enemy gets a hold of them. It's better to keep them somewhere safer, or maybe just get rid of them entirely.

"I see. You can talk about them later."

Kikyou and I started walking back to the grounds but...

"Kukuku... Ahh, man, that sure was something."

A man intercepted our return with a malicious smile on his face. It was none other than Class D's dictator, Ryuen Kakeru.

If he'd been staying right where he's at, the possibility of him eavesdropping on our conversation earlier was very high. Kikyou's expression turned serious for a brief second, but she immediately switched gears.

"Oh, hi! What are you doing here, Ryuen-kun?" she asked.

"Keh, drop it, Kikyou. The way you're acting is laughable now that I know who you truly are," he said.

Kikyou probably expected those words, so she didn't try to force her angelic act. She immediately dropped her smile and glared at him.

"Hehh... So you heard everything, huh?" Her voice turned deep and the look in her eyes darkened.

"Ohh-! That's it! That's what I'd like to see. I knew you were rotten in some way or form. This is really interesting."

"Answer my question," she insisted.

"You don't get to decide that." Ryuen looked at his right hand as it shook lightly inside his pocket. His smile widened as Kikyou started to look more shaken.

"You recorded our conversation...? How dare you..." Her fists were clenched, but she couldn't say any more.

"Kukuku, don't you worry now. I don't plan on exposing you or anything. Trust me, I really want to, but the guy beside you wouldn't let me act as I please. At least, not right now."

"What are you planning, then?" I asked.

"You could probably guess that already, Ayanokouji."

"You're not going to expose me? Then what did you record us for?"

"I can answer that, but I'd like to propose something first." Ryuen's smile widened as he looked at the two of us. "Join me, Kikyou. I don't know your past, and I'm not interested either. Ayanokouji and Suzune know about it, so you want to get rid of them, right? I'll help if you join forces with me."

"Huh? You eavesdropped on us, didn't you? I clearly said that I won't betray Kiyotaka-kun."

"Hehe, think about it. You can get rid of the only two people who know about your past. Isn't that your main goal?"

"Drop it. I won't join the likes of you." Kikyou rejected him without hesitation. "Now that I've responded to your *'proposal'*, answer my question already. From the way you worded it, it doesn't look like you'll use that recording as leverage to make me join you."

"I certainly can, but it's not the right move. You have two main weaknesses that you're currently hiding, Kikyou. One is your true nature, and one is your past. What I've recorded right here is only about your true nature. Exposing it wouldn't destroy you completely. However, it would've been different if it was your past. Am I right?"

Just by listening to that conversation, Ryuen had perfectly grasped how Kikyou's weaknesses worked. She was visibly disturbed by this.

"Then just answer me. Where are you gonna use those recordings?"

"I was wondering why the two of you were taking so long. It seems like you got held up by a troublesome person."

At that moment, the class leader, Horikita walked into the scene.

"Ahh, Suzune, perfect timing. These two were doing some nasty shit over there. Discipline your classmates, will you?" he teased.

"Stop playing around, Ryuen-kun. How did you even know we were here?" she asked.

We changed inside our respective locker rooms before coming here. Around that time, Ryuen's class should be having lessons on a different subject. To know where we are on this massive campus, he should've started following us after we exited the locker rooms. But Horikita and the others didn't notice anyone around. Even I didn't sense any presence.

That said, Ryuuken completely ignored the question as he faced her.

"Since you're already here, I'll get straight to the point. We'll make a new contract while nullifying the other one. I finally got a nice bargaining chip to do so."

"A bargaining chip...?" Horikita turned to us with a confused look.

"Ayanokouji and Kikyuu can tell you the story. For now, I'll be excusing myself. I have to make an appointment with your big brother to look over everything," he said.

It seems like Kikyuu's question had been finally answered. She couldn't say anything in return and could only bite her lips in frustration.

"What happened?" Horikita asked sharply.

The two of us answered her honestly. We told her the contents of what Ryuuken might have recorded and the conversation we had with him before she got here.

"I see..."

"What do you mean *"you see"*?" Kikyuu asked in a slightly irritated tone.

"I would advise you to not act like that towards me, Kushida-san. After getting a clear picture of your relationship with Ayanokouji-kun, and how this incident went, it's easy to tell that you're the one at fault here."

If Kikyuu didn't insist on talking to me, then Ryuuken wouldn't have anything to record. That's probably what Horikita was saying.

"Just so you know, Horikita-san, I'm aware of that more than anyone else, but I don't want to hear *you* preaching to me."

"This is the first time you've shown your true colors to me without holding back. To be honest, I feel relieved."

"Ughh! Shut up, would you? The only reason why you're taking that tone with me is that you know who I am."

Horikita had known about Kikyuu's true nature from the start, or at least, had some clue about it. If she didn't, then Horikita would've had good impressions of her, or even admired her. But because of an unfortunate coincidence of them coming from the same middle school, Horikita knew that her outside personality wasn't true and she looks at her fake act with contempt. Kikyuu then feels like Horikita has something over her. That fact alone infuriates her to no end.

If Horikita didn't tell me about her back then, the same thing might've happened to me.

Wanting to solve our current predicament, Horikita decided to ignore Kikyuu and faced me instead.

"Hmm... It's easy to guess Ryuuken-kun's plan after this, so we will

meet his demands on equal footing. Do you still have the recordings from before?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Alright. We'll just have to make sure that he can't use what he recorded here against us in the future. That's fine with you, right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Sure. It doesn't really matter to me anymore."

Our previous contract involved forcing cooperation from Ryuen's class in exchange for our silence regarding the truth about the sexual assault incident. However, we'll probably need to delete the evidence we have in exchange for Ryuen deleting the recording he took earlier.

"So you're just throwing away the contract like that?" asked Kikyou.

"It was a blessing made from disaster, anyway. If we could make use of it to prevent another disaster, then I'd say it's a net positive. And besides, Ayanokouji-kun was the one who got it for the class. I don't really plan on using it myself since cooperating with Ryuen-kun carries its own risks even with a contract binding him."

"To prevent a disaster, huh? So you're going to help me?"

"Why are you surprised? Your abilities are an asset to the class. If you can keep on doing what you're doing, then I'd join in on preventing Ryuen-kun from exposing you."

"You're aware that your know-it-all attitude pisses me off the most, right? That's why I can't stand you," Kikyou spat.

"Is that so? You'll have to make do with it, then. This is who I am. It's fine if you can't stand me. It's not like I'm forcing you to interact with me, anyway. But as a classmate, I'd rather think of us as allies."

"You're free to think that. But my only true ally is Kiyotaka-kun. I want to make that clear."

"That's alright, as long as we're not against each other."

Kikyou clicked her tongue and walked away.

"I'll be going ahead."

Horikita and I followed suit, but our pace was much slower.

"Kikyou really doesn't like you," I commented.

"Looks like it," she sighed.

"That's just her personality. Because you know something about her past and her true nature, it's inevitable for her to feel some sort of inferiority. For someone like her, who thinks she's above everyone else, she'll never tolerate feeling like she's below someone. It doesn't matter if you're against her or not."

"How childish."

"That's rich coming from you."

Horikita tried to elbow me, but I managed to dodge it. She didn't

say anything back, probably because she knew I was right.

"Do you think she won't betray us?" she suddenly asked, breaking the silence.

"Does it matter what I think?"

"Don't dodge the question."

"To be honest, only time will tell. She won't betray me-- at least not right now. But whether or not she will betray you and the class is a different story. I did tell her to not go after you a long time ago, but I guess you'll have to work for it to make sure."

"Can't you keep her in check?"

"Maybe. I don't really feel like getting involved."

Horikita rolled her eyes, but she didn't complain. She was aware of my current stance as an observer-- a normal student of Class A. She knew that forcing me to do something was futile.

"By the way, about the data you were collecting earlier..."

"We won't keep them or submit them to the teacher, so they won't go public. Don't worry."

It seems like she knew what my concern was. That's convenient. The only way for that information to spread was via rumors. After all, the energetic boys in my class know about it. There's no guarantee that they won't blabber to the other classes.

"Hey, Kiyotaka, Horikita!" called Ken.

The two of us finally got back. Ken asked me to run, but I told him that I didn't want to. He complained for a while, but that was the end of it. Hirata ended up adding me to the final relay, though.

Vol. 5: Chapter 5.1 - Alteration

Our class started practicing independently during the free periods. This time, we made our way toward the athletic grounds adjacent to the main building.

"Woah, check it out..." Ike was wearing an unpleasant expression as he stared back at the students who were watching us from their classroom windows. "That's Ichinose-san's class, right? Class B is checking us out, too."

"You can really feel the pressure," added Yamauchi.

"We're training in such a conspicuous place. It's only natural for us to be watched. I'm sure you'd do the same if you were in their position," Hondou shrugged them off with a composed response.

"You're pretty confident, Ryoutarou."

"It's no use being a scaredy-cat. We're Class A now, remember?"

Miyamoto jumped at him with a laugh.

"What's with you, Ryoutarou? You're being really cool, lately!" he said.

"The heck are you talking about?"

"Yeah... I just noticed it, but you've been talking to a lot of girls this week..." said Yamauchi.

"That's not it. Kikyou-chan's close with everyone, right? That's the only reason why I get to talk with Nishimura-san and the others more often."

"You idiot! The fact that you're so close to Kikyou-chan lately... Kuu-! I'm so jealous!" Ike cried in agony.

"Is your popular phase starting to come? You, of all people?!"

"Shut up, Haruki! I don't wanna hear that from *you*!" replied Hondou.

The four of them were having fun talking to each other, but I hope they get on with their training. I glanced at another part of the place and saw Professor and Ijuuin having a conclave-like meeting with a lot of the guys. I walked toward them to say hi.

"Ohh, Ayanokouji, hey there!" Kikuchi was the first one who noticed me.

"What are you guys up to?" I asked.

I can see that they were doing some stretches and limb swings.

"The usual. We're just chatting about anime and stuff. Ah, don't get it wrong, though. We're doing our warm-ups while talking," he

explained.

"Then just say you're warming up, dude..."

"Ahaha, that's true. But we're more immersed in our talks, so it'd feel like a lie."

Professor and Ijuuin were the experts in terms of general knowledge, but several guys in our class are also into anime, manga, and the like. In fact, I'd say it's most of them. Even the lethargic Ueno knows more than me.

I guess that's the difference between having a delayed start and consuming such media from childhood.

"Hey, you guys! What's up?" Hondou waved his hand as he approached the group.

The other three followed suit.

"Oh, Hondou. Wanna join our warm-up session?" asked Sugawara.

"That's obvious... You think I'd rather join those meatheads over there?" Hondou pointed at another group of boys who were doing their own warm-ups.

Ken, Akito, Minami (Setsuya), Makida, and Hirata... I guess the word "meathead" applies to most of them, though Ken has a different understanding of the word.

"Hirata and Miyake aren't meatheads, though..." said Okitani.

"Hahaha! My point stands, dude. Take Hirata as an example. He won't be there for long," he laughed. "Look. He's getting dragged away by the girls."

The boys looked at the scene with dispirited expressions.

"*Hiwata-kyun~! Pwease hewp me warm up~!* That's probably what they're swarming him for. Tch," Ike instantly showed his displeasure.

The other guys sympathized with him, too.

"Of course, Miyake will leave instructing the other guys to Sudou so he can hang out with Hasebe-san and Sakura-san. In the end, it's the meatheads of the class that are left."

"Sudou, Setsu and Sumu, huh...? I guess so." Minami (Hakuo) squinted his eyes, trying to look at the group with his sun-irritated eyes.

"What am I even listening to anymore..." Yukimura muttered from the side.

"So you're here as well, Yukimura."

The two of us put a small distance from the currently noisy cluster of guys. One group was getting jealous of Hirata. The other was continuing their anime talk. All while doing warm-ups.

"Kikuchi and Minami invited me to exercise with them, so I accepted. I didn't expect it to go this way, though."

"Really? Isn't this kind of development common for these guys?"

"Hm, now that you say that, I guess you're right," he nodded before facing me again. "How about you? I noticed that you haven't been able to hang out with the rest of the class lately."

Yukimura was in a similar position as me as a class observer. But he only usually pays attention to each student's academic development. So I never thought he'd notice the subtle change in our class's social biosphere.

"Ahh, I guess so. There hasn't been a lot of opportunities for me to hang out with some of our classmates in school."

Contrary to popular belief, my social interaction actually weakened a bit after the start of the second semester. There are a bunch of reasons for it, but I guess it's starting to become noticeable.

Of course, I'm still hanging out with my group, but my presence inside the class was dimming.

"Well, even if that's the case, I'm sure you're still our most respected classmate." Yukimura was blunt about whatever he says. It didn't matter if it was positive or negative. "Speaking of presence..."

He glanced at Hondou, who was joyfully engaging with the group. It seems like he wasn't only getting along with the girls. A lot of the guys really enjoy hanging out with him in recent days.

"Hondou's been pretty social lately. His change was so drastic that even I took notice of it. He's usually just chatting with Ike and the others. Either that or he's busy fiddling with his phone."

Those words carried a lot of weight considering it was Yukimura who said it.

"That's great, isn't it? He gets along with most of the boys, anyway. It shouldn't be that surprising for him to gain more confidence."

"Confidence, huh? I guess that's the word I was looking for. He's acting a lot like Hirata. He used to boast about his thin presence, but he got rid of that identity in just a couple of weeks. Maybe hanging out with Kushida helped him a lot."

"Ahh, you're right. Kikyou had mentioned that to me some time ago, as well. I guess her radiant personality had an effect on Hondou."

The boys started to scatter as they chose what kind of competition they'll be practicing for.

"That's great and all, but I hope he and his group put more effort into their studies. I'm basically useless in this school festival in contrast to Sudou, but at least the two of us are doing our best to cover our weaknesses," he sighed. "Alright. I'll practice the 100-meter dash and 200-meter dash with Kikuchi-kun over there. See

you around, Ayanokouji."

"Yeah, do you best."

More groups started forming from both the boys and the girls. As everything progresses, I'm sure our roster will get more and more optimized.

Author's Notes:

Thanks to Year 2 Volume 7, I managed to get a clearer picture of the class's relationship with each other.

Vol. 5: Chapter 5.1.2 - Making Contact

After classes ended, Horikita asked for my company regarding our encounter with Ryuen a couple of days ago. The two of us were the only ones left in the classroom now.

"Did Ryuen contact you already?"

"No, he hasn't. But I'm sure he will, soon. Nii-san wouldn't be leading his class this time, so he shouldn't be that busy."

"I guess so."

The two of us were staring out of the window. The orange sky was starting to darken.

"Say, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Yeah?"

"Kushida-san hates me because I know about her true nature and it makes her feel like I'm above her. I can understand where she's coming from, but you're the same case... So why does she consider you as an ally?"

I can feel Horikita's genuine confusion. She faced me with a serious stare, so I could only respond in earnest.

"To put it simply, I made Kikyou accept that I'll always be above her."

Horikita's eyes trembled slightly before she mustered up her composure.

"I see... I don't think there's anything I can do to achieve that."

"No, there isn't."

Right now, the two of them can coexist while living in different worlds. But in this school, where classes don't change each year, the two of them are bound to interact closely someday. Whether the current peace crumbles in the future is up to the two of them.

If Kikyou was against me, then I wouldn't mind giving Horikita a hand in containing her. But since she wasn't, Horikita would have to deal with a potential threat on her own.

"Kushida-san may be an asset, but I will take action if she tries to betray the class. I hope you won't give her any special treatment."

"If you want to expel her for defecting from the class, then do so. Back then, I promised to protect her from you because I needed her to quickly advance to Class A. But I've already done that. It would

be a shame if our class collapses, but I won't move for you nor move against you."

Of course, on the off chance that Horikita wanted to expel Kikyou for no reason, then I'd take Kikyou's side.

"You've really embraced your observer role, haven't you?"

"I think you got it wrong. I've been the observer-type from a young age. I just thought I'd change things up a bit in high school."

"Why not continue changing things up until you graduate?"

"We've been friends for a long time now. You already know the answer to that."

"Because you dislike trouble, huh?" she sighed. "I guess you never change no matter what your position is."

I don't think I need to change, nor do I have the ability to do so. And even if I wanted to, it wouldn't be easy.

"I don't think Ryuen-kun will make contact with us today, so I'll be going ahead now. I need to submit a report to Chabashira-sensei. Thanks for accompanying me, Ayanokouji-kun."

"It's fine. I'll see you tomorrow, Horikita."

She nodded in response before exiting the classroom.

"They should be here soon..." I muttered.

The wait didn't even take ten minutes before the sliding door opened once more.

"Come with me," a familiar voice of a girl said.

I silently turned around and followed suit. I guess it's finally time.

Author's Notes:

I wanted to make a reflective monologue with Kiyotaka describing himself as "the ordinary, curious boy that wants to live a normal life and the wretched creation of an ambitious monster". Those are the two opposing sides of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. However, it is yet to be known whether he's aware of this. After all, the normal Kiyotaka is really just a curious high school boy who wants to know more about the outside world. But the moment something threatens his peace, his White Room personality manifests simultaneously, and will do everything to dismantle his enemies.

Vol. 5: Chapter 6.1 - The Princess of the Playground

"The library, huh?" I muttered after figuring out the path we were taking.

The girl in front of me didn't speak a word. I can't tell if she was ordered to stay quiet, but for now, I wanna try making a conversation.

"You're Kamuro, right?"

"Yes, I'm Kamuro."

She didn't even look back as she responded, and she even sighed. I'm glad I couldn't see her face. My heart wouldn't be able to take it if I saw her rolling her eyes in annoyance.

But at least I got a response.

"Are you with anyone else?"

"No," she replied.

"Hm..."

Before I could mumble to myself any longer, the two of us finally reached our destination.

"You're not going in?" I asked after seeing her unmoving posture.

"She wanted to meet you alone, so I'll be going home after this."

"Ohh... I see."

Kamuro turned around without changing her expression.

I entered the library and admired its size like I usually do. I really like how it feels whenever I'm here. That said, the vibe wasn't as light-hearted knowing what's about to come next.

As I walked past the large shelves, a lone girl was sitting on a two-person table with a certain board game ready for play.

That petite stature, silver hair, charming smile, and prepossessing face-- this was my first time to be directly on the receiving end of it.

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun," Sakayanagi Arisu smiled at me with a nod. "Would like you to play a game of chess?"

I took the seat in front of her and glanced at the board.

"This should be our first official meeting. It's a pleasure to finally talk to you," she said.

"Likewise."

She gently took the digital chess clock and adjusted it.

"A 30-minute rapid game should be sufficient, yes?"

"I guess it's fine as long there's no increment. We don't want to be in here for too long."

"You don't have to worry about anything. I've already consulted the faculty about borrowing the library for a bit."

"It's a different thing when it's already past school hours. You must've used quite a bit of private points."

"How sharp." Sakayanagi put the clock back in place and moved her pawn to *e4* before pressing the button. "Now then. Why don't we begin our little chat?"

e4

I briefly replied with *e5* to get things started.

e5

"Do you have anything that you want to talk about in particular?"

Nf3

"I should be the one asking you that. You're the one who called me here, weren't you?"

Nc6

"Fufu~, you're right. Oh my, how silly of me."

Bc4

The Italian, huh? I almost grabbed my dark-squared bishop, but I decided to move my other knight instead. **(1)**

Nf6

"Oh... I guess you have no intention of getting things heated," she smiled. **(2)**

d3

"That might be the case. I think it's better to have a nice, relaxing talk."

Bc5

"Is that so? I don't see why we can't do both at the same time."

"Well, it's your choice. You're the one with the white pieces."

"Fufufu. It's alright. We can relax in the opening if you want."

c3

After pushing her pawn to *c3*, the Giuoco Pianissimo was finally on the board. Sakayanagi interlaced her fingers as she laid back on her chair to talk to me. **(3)**

"So you've heard about me from my father, correct?"

d6

"That's right. He called for me during the start of May."

O-O

O-O **(4)**

"I actually have mixed feelings about that... Do you know how disappointed I was knowing that the element of surprise had gone to smoke? I would've loved to see that calm expression of yours crumble in panic."

Unlike Kikyou, her sweet smile did not try to hide her belligerence.

Re1

"To be completely honest, you might've actually caught me off-guard if it weren't for my prior knowledge." I ignored her developing move toward the center and pushed my pawn to a5. "You never know when you might get attacked from the side." (5)

"You really don't want me to play b4, do you?" Sakayanagi chuckled. (6)

h3

h6

"According to the chairman, you know where I'm from."

Nbd2

Be6

Bb5

Qb8

"Of course. That's precisely why I wanted the two of us to be alone. I assume you don't want any outsiders to hear about it..." Sakayanagi grabbed her light-squared bishop with a smile. "The White Room, I mean."

The first capture finally happened on Move #11. She confidently took my knight on c6. (7)

Bxc6

The moves we've made so far were pretty standard, but this one was a bit on the rarer side.

This could only mean one thing. Sakayanagi was prepared for this line.

My time ticked away as I started thinking.

"Are you surprised? From the start, I knew that you were going to avoid me."

"So you predicted that I would play these moves, huh? Of course, it was also possible for me to play other openings, but I'm guessing you've prepared lines for those, as well?"

"I had fun preparing them last night," she replied.

It seems like I have a troublesome opponent on my hand.

After a bit of thinking, I finally took the bishop.

bxc6

d4

exd4

cxd4

Bb6

The dust settles for that little bout. I may have the bishop pair, but Sakayanagi got a dominating center in return. (8)

"I'm sure you're curious about why I'm fixated on you."

Based on our phone call back then, she did give me the impression of someone who's interested in me, albeit not romantically. If I think about it rationally, it must be my abnormal identity as a White Room student.

a4

"That's a nice move," I said. **(9)**

"Thank you very much."

Her brimming confidence was a sight to see. Alright, I'll take this a little more seriously.

Re8

Ra3

"Fixated, huh? Do tell me your reason, Sakayanagi."

"Fufufu~. The reason should be pretty obvious. We have finally reunited. If only you knew how much elation I felt when I saw your name on top of the rankings after our first ever midterm exams."

"So that's how you knew who I was."

"I was surprised. I didn't think I could meet you this soon. I could barely hold my excitement."

"Seeing how Kamuro was the only one who called for me along with how she immediately left the two of us alone, I guess you haven't told anyone about me, yet."

Qa7

I played queen to *a7*, creating a queen-bishop battery to target her d-pawn.

Nf1

"I don't plan on doing so-- at least, not at present," she replied, re-maneuvering her knight to *f1* and giving the pawn a second defender with her queen. **(10)**

"I see..."

Sakayanagi would love to commence her attack on my king as soon as possible. After all, my pieces aren't that well-coordinated to defend it right now. Of course, I wouldn't let that happen.

d5

e5

After seeing me push *d5*, Sakayanagi narrowed her eyes before quickly playing *e5*. I let her take some more space in the center, but my knight was then allowed to jump in.

Ne4

"That's a strong knight, isn't it? Would you like to trade it off?" she asked, moving her *f1*-knight back to *d2*. **(11)**

N1d2

"Take it as you please." If she wants my knight, we'll have to trade on my terms.

Bf5

Sakayanagi smiled but she didn't capture my knight.

Re2

I stopped thinking for a second and opted for a normal developing move.

Rad8

This prompted Sakayanagi to think for a quick second in return.

"Wouldn't things be easier for you if people find out who I am?" I asked.

"Really? Well, it might be the case, but I personally don't think so. If anything, people knowing about you would be quite the nuisance."

Nb3

"Nuisance? I thought that was only from my perspective. Why would it be a nuisance for a rival student like you?" I asked, pushing *c5*.

c5

She raised her eyes from the board and looked at me. Sakayanagi took the pawn on *c5*, and her unwavering smile told me the answer before she could even verbalize it.

dx c5

"Why would I let anyone else get in the way? I'm the perfect person to bury false genius."

"Is that so...? Bury me, huh...?"

I grabbed the white pawn on *c5* and stared at it. I can capture it in two ways-- with my knight or with my bishop. However, only one of them is the correct way. One leads to a better game, and one leads to a trap set by the girl in front of me. **(12)**

Deliberately touching an opponent's chess piece means you have to capture it, but I plan to do just that. I placed the pawn outside of the board and I looked at Sakayanagi before grabbing my chosen piece-- the bishop.

Bxc5

"Can you bury me?"

She chuckled to herself without restraint.

"I'm sorry for laughing. I just couldn't help it." This time, it was her turn to grab my chess piece and play with it. "The more we play, the more I get convinced that you're the real deal. Well, it's not like I doubted it for even a second, but this has been my dearest wish. Seeing you right in front of me... It's just surreal."

Sakayanagi proceeded to take my bishop with her knight to which I take the knight back with my queen.

Nxc5

Qxc5

She puts her knight in the center and attacks my other bishop, but I retreated it back to *d7*.

Nd4

Bd7

"Your dearest wish, huh?"

"Fufu~. I've been looking forward to this, Ayanokouji-kun. My dearest wish... I will be able to realize it by destroying the greatest masterpiece that your father has ever created."

I wanted that. My defeat... would also mean that man's defeat. If Sakayanagi could destroy me, then she'll take the sad contradiction that I carried within me along with it. I wanted that-- I wished for that-- from the bottom of my heart.

As I lost myself inside my own head. Her next move was once again, a fast one.

Bf4

"I'm sure you already know, but... I've stepped down from being the class's leader. If want to take back your place as Class A, you'd have to fight Horikita, not me."

"Horikita Suzune-san, is it?"

"And she's not the only excellent student in our class."

"Are you talking about Hirata Yousuke-kun? Or Kushida Kikyousan?" Sakayanagi let out a sigh. "I just want to let you know, Ayanokouji-kun. None of them matters to me, not even the likes of Ryuuen-kun or Ichinose-san. *You're* the one I want to face off against. That desire had only gone up the more I spend time with you here."

"That might be the case for you... but I'm done taking the spotlight." I said, retreating my queen back to e7.

Qe7

So far, Sakayanagi hadn't taken more than a minute to make her moves. She had around fifteen more minutes than I did. That's how far she had prepared. However, her smile dimmed after my move.

"Once again, you've found the best move." (13)

I've severely limited Sakayanagi's attacking chances, but she still made her move almost instantly. So even that was within her preparations.

Nb5

She attacked my c7 pawn with her knight and d5 pawn with her queen. If I play c6, I can attack her knight while defending the d5 pawn at the same time-- a logical move.

Or at least, that's what Sakayanagi wanted me to do. (14)

Bxb5

Not to be caught up in her schemes, I made the decisive decision to exchange my bishop with her knight.

axb5

Ng5

She took back with her a-pawn and I played knight to g5 to seal the deal.

"Do you want to wrap this up, Sakayanagi? I don't think continuing any further would make any sense."

"Fufufu... You might be right."

Using her time, Sakayanagi looked at the board for a couple of minutes before sighing in disappointment.

"You're cruel, Ayanokouji-kun. Did you really have to end things there?"

If Sakayanagi exchanges her dark-squared bishop for my knight, I can easily convert the heavy-piece endgame into a draw. If not, then no matter what Sakayanagi plays, she won't be able to stop me from posting my knight to e6. Once that happens, her chances of playing for a win are almost gone. It'll be a draw no matter what.

(15)

"I never intended to win. I told you, I just wanted to have a nice, relaxing talk."

In fact, it was the best course of action to not play for a win as black. Sakayanagi's preparation was very deep. If I tried to go for the win and make risky plays, it might've not ended well for me.

"I calculated a lot of possible variations. I know you can play for an advantage down the line."

"That'll just make our positions switch. Even if I try to play on, I'm sure your skills are more than enough to hold the position."

Sakayanagi knew that I was right. She could only giggle before offering her hand.

"That was a nice game, Ayanokouji-kun. It seems like my wait for you was worth it."

"I enjoyed the game, as well. Your preparation was amazing."

With that, our little chess match ended in a draw.

After the two of us exited the library, the main building had long succumbed to the darkness of the night.

"This is my first time staying here until this late," she said.

"It's almost 8 o'clock. I've stayed behind before, but not this late."

"We're on the same boat, then. Doesn't it seem thrilling?"

"I guess so."

After informing the faculty about our exit, Sakayanagi and I decided to walk home together.

"Thinking about it now, it's really been so long since I've first seen you."

"So you were taken to the White Room back when we were just kids?"

"Yes. It's been quite a while. 8 years and 225 days, actually."

8 years and 225 days, huh...?

"I was playing chess during that day. I see... So you were behind one of the many one-way glasses during that time."

"You remember? My father brought me there and I saw you dominate everyone. I've been fond of chess ever since."

A small gust of wind blew which aided the sudden relaxing silence.

"To challenge you and defeat you... I wonder if you could grant me that wish?" she asked.

"We're already in Class A. There's no reason for me to engage in class battles any longer."

"What if you weren't in Class A?"

"I'm sure they'll be fine. We have more than enough class points, anyway."

Sakayanagi stopped dead in her tracks. I looked back and saw her dauntless smile.

"What if your class points were low enough...? Would that prompt you to make a move? I see it in your eyes, Ayanokouji-kun. We're the same. I find little pleasure in this boring school life. You stepped down from being your class's leader because there was nothing else for you to do. However, I can help you with that. I'll destroy your class thoroughly so you fight for them once again. And then, we'll have a nice and serious battle between the two of us."

This was her goal from the very beginning. And from the way things are looking, it seems like her plans were already in motion.

"You can't say that for sure. Unlike you, having a boring school life isn't too bad for me."

"That may be true... But you're not finished testing yourself yet, are you?"

She tapped into the conflicting feelings I held inside my heart. If she was the one offering to help, then who am I to refuse?

"Sakayanagi..." I looked her straight in the eyes. "Can you... destroy my class?"

"Fufufu~... As you wish, Ayanokouji-kun."

Author's Notes:

Illustration colored by Reddit user u/SlaveOfPriscilla.

I wrote the notations down as they did it for maximum immersion.

The following notes are for those who want to understand the nuances in their dialogue related to chess.

1. Kiyotaka initially wanted to move his dark-squared bishop to c5. But knowing Arisu as someone who likes to fight head-on, he knew she'd go for the Evan's Gambit; an aggressive and sharp attacking gambit for white. Kiyotaka was too lazy to play into that variation, so he grabbed his knight and played the Two Knights' Defense instead.

2. Of course, his hunch about facing an Evan's Gambit was confirmed after Arisu's comment.

3. This is the basic setup for a Giuoco Pianissimo.

4. The notation for King-side Castle.

5. If Kiyotaka reacted to Arisu developing her rook to e1 with a move that tries to reinforce the center, she will strike using a flank pawn from the side, which is the b-pawn in this case. This nicely ties in with Kiyotaka's dialogue.

6. If Kiyotaka moved his bishop to c5 on Move #3, Arisu would've replied with pawn to b4, aka the Evan's Gambit. Later on, Kiyotaka pushed his pawn to a5 on Move #7 to prevent Arisu from again, pushing her pawn to b4. Hence, her comment.

7. Bxc6 - bishop takes on c6.

8. This is the structure that Kiyotaka was describing.

9. The move pawn to a4 had three purposes. Firstly, it prevents the a2 pawn from being targeted by Kiyotaka's light-squared bishop. Secondly, it locks his a5 pawn in place, preventing the dark-squared bishop from coming to a5 itself to use that new diagonal (with its current diagonal blocked by Arisu's d4 pawn). Lastly, the rook in a1 can now be lifted into the game.

10. The knight maneuvering to f1 is a common move in the Giuoco Pianissimo because of the given options of helping with the attack on the king-side or moving back to defend the center. This ties in with Arisu's probing words and attitude.

11. Arisu's pawn push took a lot of space, but Kiyotaka's knight became extremely dominant. It would've been ideal for Arisu to trade it off, but it wasn't that easy.

12. If Kiyotaka took with the knight, he would've been caught in a trap involving bishop captures on h6. With his pieces stranded on the queen-side, Arisu would start swarming his king after that piece sacrifice. Meanwhile, capturing the pawn with the dark-squared bishop forces Arisu to take it back with her knight because it'll be too strong if left on the board.

13. Queen to e7 was an extremely important move that really dropped the potency of Arisu's attacking chances. The queen's presence near the king helps out so much with the defense, making it the best tactical retreat and also the absolute best move. Of course, it connects beautifully with Kiyotaka's dialogue about stepping down.

14. If Kiyotaka plays c6, Arisu will have the initiative to take her

advantage back. She even has the option of playing rook takes knight on e4, an exchange sacrifice that leads to her making an extremely powerful knight on d5, which will arguably be her most powerful piece in the game going forward.

15. Kiyotaka managed to exchange enough pieces and pawns to create an ultra-solid set-up around the king. Arisu might be able to capture the pawn on a5, but Kiyotaka has a nigh-unbreakable blockade on the king-side along with his passed pawn on the d-file.

This game was based on a match between GM Hikaru Nakamura and GM Ding Liren during the FIDE Candidates (2022).

P.S. - I'm not gonna lie. I was pretty underwhelmed with how Kinu-sensei handled the chess battle in the light novel.

It was by no means bad and I don't doubt Kinu-sensei's knowledge of chess, but I guess he was thinking about his audience too much. Since chess isn't that big in Japan (unlike shogi or go), he must've thought that going into detail would be a waste of time and space for the volume, so I couldn't really blame him.

However, I simply couldn't take Kiyotaka and Arisu's chess battle seriously with only the vague dialogues and spectator comments.

The final nail in the coffin was Kiyotaka's comment after the match.

"Your queen sacrifice was brilliant."

Bruh? That was the most 1000-rated evaluation I've ever heard (or even lower), not because it was short or simple, but because it was simply wrong.

In the match, Tsukishiro interfered somewhere around the endgame, but nowhere near the actual end of the match. Tsukishiro's supposed brilliant "second-best move" was beaten by Arisu's counter-brilliancy before she and Kiyotaka continued playing. A flurry of moves was made all the way until checkmate which Arisu forced via queen sacrifice.

"What gives?" you might be asking.

Well, all of what Kinu-sensei has written clearly told us that Arisu's brilliant move happened way before her queen sacrifice. The queen sacrifice was just the move that executed Kiyotaka. It's flashy, sure, but there was nothing "brilliant" about it. Arisu even pointed it out herself, but Kiyotaka's attention was on that queen sacrifice for whatever reason.

That scene made Kiyotaka look like a complete chess amateur.

Vol. 5: Chapter 7.1 - The Right Blend

It was a Friday in mid-September. Our practice was going swimmingly, is what I wish I could say, but nothing is perfect in this world.

"Hmm... I really am perfect."

Kouenji would probably disagree with me then. Good for him, I guess. I walked past the relaxing Kouenji and arrived near the track.

"Hey, Hondou-kun! Stop using your phone and start practicing! You too, Miyamoto-kun!" scolded Onodera.

"A-Ah, sorry! I just had to respond to someone. I'll be right there!" he replied.

"Ehh, I'm pretty tired already..." said Miyamoto as he faced Hondou. "Hey, Ryoutarou, you've been on your phone since we started practicing. I thought you were gonna show off your hidden potential?"

"Pfft, did you seriously believe that? I know my place in this world, Soshi. I've got no hidden talents whatsoever. I was just going with the flow when Haruki and Kanji were yapping about their goals to get girls," he shrugged.

"Haha, I guess that makes sense. But who are you chatting with? I thought you were going for Kikyou-chan?"

Hey, hey... I don't think you should talk about that when there are a bunch of girls near you. Even I can understand your conversation clearly from a distance.

"I-Idiot, don't talk about that here! I'm also practicing seriously, y'know? It's just that..." He started whispering to Miyamoto.

"Ehhh?! You're asking a girl from another class for help?!"

"So much for my whispering, you moron!"

Miyamoto sprinted out of Hondou's attempt to smack him and they started chasing each other around. I wonder if this could be considered practice? It wasn't long until they reunited with Ike and Yamauchi on the field. A lot of our classmates were having the same routine of chit-chatting in between their practice sets.

"They're finally here," I muttered after seeing two figures approach my spot.

Two girls finished running as they sat down on the grass, huffing and puffing from exhaustion. I crouched to their level so I can hold a conversation.

"Please... **pant** run faster. You're holding me back."

"I don't think that's possible, Horikita-san... **pant** I'm already trying my best. Onodera-san is a faster runner than me, but even she can't keep up with you," replied Kikyuu.

"Are you guys having trouble?" I asked.

"Ayanokouji-kun? I didn't notice you there," said Horikita.

Well, sorry for my thin presence.

"Kiyotaka-kun..." Kikyuu smiled despite having a bad time. "It seems like we can't find a partner for Horikita-san in the three-legged race."

"Looks like it."

"None of them can keep up with me. This is really troubling..."

Horikita uttered those words without a hint of arrogance or disappointment. She looks genuinely concerned.

"How many partners have you been with? I saw you running with Onodera and Shinohara the other day."

"Oh, I've only partnered up with the two of them. And today, I'm trying things out with Kushida-san."

"I see... What happened with the other two?"

"Shinohara-san immediately wanted to pair up with someone else after one run. Onodera-san managed to barely keep up, but she gave up in the end. I tried to encourage them to train harder with me, but it didn't work..."

She tried to encourage them, huh?

"Did they say anything else?"

"Hm...? Well... They briefly apologized about not being fast enough before asking to find another partner."

"They didn't tell you to slow down?"

"Tell me to slow down...? Uh, I think Onodera-san said something like that, but she immediately took it back."

"I see... So that's the problem." I looked at the grinning Kikyuu who probably understood the whole situation. "Why don't you tell her?"

"Kiyotaka-kun... You know I can't do that," she replied.

"I might not be able to hold myself back from talking out of pure spite, and it'll risk my image if anyone overhears me... again..." was the continuation I could come up with from looking at her beaming face.

"I'll just tell her now, then." I turned to Horikita once more. "You're the problem, Horikita. You should've realized that by now."

"I'm the problem...?" Horikita looked worried rather than angry which exhibits her growth.

After a quick think, she assembled the pieces together.

"You think I should slow down for my partner. Is that correct?"

"I get that your idea was to be as fast as humanly possible, but it won't work in the three-legged race."

"That much is obvious. I know that coordination between partners is key. That's why I initially wanted to train until my partner and I are of the same pace."

"Yes, but that in itself is a problem on your end. You may recognize that you need to cooperate with your partner, but you're setting the range of their labor a tad bit too high."

Horikita set the upper limit and encouraged her partner to reach it, but alas, they simply couldn't. Her idea was to practice until they can eventually do so, but it was fundamentally impossible unless there was someone with the same speed as hers or if we had months to practice. Both options don't seem to be available for us.

Even Onodera, who was innately faster at running than Horikita was having a hard time being her partner. Unlike Horikita, Onodera instinctively tries to adjust her strides to focus more on coordination rather than speed. That's why she ends up getting dragged by Horikita who goes all-out without any regard for her partner.

"I don't think you have to worry about speed, Horikita-san. It's better to think about the harmony of our movements," added Kikyou.

"Not worry about speed, is it?"

Horikita thought about our words as Kikyou looked around to see if anyone was nearby.

"In other words, you're not thinking about your partner at all. No matter how much you encourage them to run faster, they can't just magically raise their speed to match your level. Shinohara-san and Onodera-san probably chose not to say anything out of their respect for you, but your method simply won't fly. I almost tripped a bunch of times because of your thoughtlessness. Would you take responsibility if your partner gets injured in an accident?" Kikyou elaborated her honest criticism with her usual angelic veneer.

"Your words don't match your face, Kushida-san."

"Fuck off," she smiled. "Ack-!"

I grabbed Kikyou's head and ruffled her hair as I talked to Horikita.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun, you're being rough!" she complained.

"Kyah!"

"Look at them!"

"I wish she was me!"

"Ohh, good going, Ayanokouji!"

"To touch Kushida-chan like that... I'm so jealous!"

I instantly heard some squeals from girls and boys alike. I knew

that the cause was my casual skinship with Kikyou, but I personally didn't really care. I continued ruffling her hair like I usually do.

"Kikyou's right, Horikita. I know you want to win, but unless you pair up with your own clone, running at your top speed without any adjustments will only harm you and your partner."

"Now that I think about it, the problem was pretty obvious. It was foolish of me to oversee such a thing... Thank you for the advice," she bowed lightly.

"Kiyotaka-kun, you're ruining my hair!"

She grabbed my hand and glared at me.

"Really? It was already ruined before you got here, though..."

"Still! Geez..." She continued fanning herself before grabbing my towel. "Ugh, I'm drenched in sweat. Lend this to me for a bit. I doubt you'd need to use them right now, anyway."

Kikyou correctly guessed that the towel around my neck was still dry and clean. I haven't really practiced much today, so I didn't have to use them for anything.

"Oh my god, that's Ayanokouji-kun's towel!"

"Kushida-san is using it!"

"Kyah~!"

I thought my careless habit was the end of it, but Kikyou's actions escalated things even more.

"You can take that towel. Just give it back after class," I said.

Kikyou jumped to my side and whispered in a bewitching manner.

"You're free to do what you want with it later."

"Idiot," I replied, flicking her forehead.

"Ow-! That was uncalled for!"

"You're making the class even rowdier. Let's stop here."

She took a step back and waved her hand.

"Done flirting?" asked Horikita.

"Yep, so let's continue practicing, Horikita-san!"

Kikyou looked cheerful and enthusiastic, but I know that practicing with Horikita was probably the last thing she'd like to do.

Vol. 5: Chapter 7.2 - No Time for Breaks

During the night of that same day, my intention to relax inside my room was disrupted by a couple of sudden calls.

"Hello?"

"Good evening, Ayanokouji. Are you busy?"

The first person to contact me was an unknown number. But after hearing the other person's voice, I knew that it was none other than the student council president, Horikita Manabu.

"I was cooking, but it's alright."

"I see. I called to give you a warning. Once the second semester starts rolling, I will finally be stepping down as president. If you want to move against Nagumo, then you'll have to decide on your approach soon."

I sat on my bed and sighed.

"Then why not decide now?"

"That's ideal, but do you have enough information to make your best move?"

"Of course. For my source of that information... Well, I'm talking to him right now."

"I see. Then let's hear your inquiries."

"By deciding on my approach, your talking about whether I should fight Nagumo from the shadows or out in the open, am I right?"

"The fact that you're asking such a question means that you're considering another approach, correct?"

This guy, answering my question with another question. He's still as sharp as ever just as I'd expect from him.

"Yeah. I was wondering if I could just let Nagumo do whatever he wants."

"Based on what we've talked about last time, you must have a vague idea of what's about to come. Are you sure about letting Nagumo loose after he ascends to power?"

"A vague idea is just a vague idea in the end. That's why I'm still lying low at the moment. Why don't you just tell me everything that you know? Depending on your answer, I might just choose to fight him head-on."

Horikita Manabu scoffed as if he understood what I was doing. I wanted free information from him without making an effort, but I guess that's too ambitious of me.

"To be honest, I'm not against the idea of giving you every information I have on Nagumo. Unfortunately, I cannot help you when it comes to his true goals and motives. As much as I want to tell you, I'm not so sure of it myself. Only he knows what he truly wants to do."

"So even you can't get a read on him? Given my initial impression of Nagumo, I find that hard to believe."

Frankly speaking, I don't think Nagumo is anything special.

"You might be right, but that's just because we think too differently from each other."

It wasn't a matter of skill or ability. Their mindset and outlook on things were just too unlike. In other words, he doesn't find it hard to read him. Rather, he finds it hard to *understand* him. Of course, that's just speculation on my part. I haven't interacted with Nagumo enough to know just how different he really is from the president.

"I see. Then I'll accept any helpful information before deciding."

After a short pause, he finally started laying out the context for what Nagumo was potentially scheming.

"The school was built on the idea of meritocracy, but as you've noticed, things were never as simple as they were intended to be. While the ranking system favoring the class with the most points by graduation is still in place, a lot of incompetent and undeserving students are still able to experience those benefits as long as they belong to the winning class in the end. Meanwhile, amazing students with actual abilities are left defeated if they fail to carry their own class to victory. It's the glaring flaw of the current system that's been around since the school's founding."

"That's why harsher rules regarding expulsion were put in place, right? But, well, even if that was the case, preventing those expulsions is also a test of ability for each competent student. Pitting those students against each other was the core idea of the system, that's why each class, despite having different labels, may find themselves on an equal footing more often than not."

If Class A was really composed of all the Class A-esque students, then competition would be essentially pointless. And of course, competence is still a broad word. If the school really wanted competent students to compete, then finding 160 of them would be easy if they were searching for candidates all over the country. It wouldn't make sense for them to admit students like Yamauchi, who is generally incompetent in every sense of the word, or Ueno, who couldn't care less about the class competitions-- no offense to them. In other words, this school was more than just a meritocratic team battle.

"So you've understood this much in such a short time."

"It is true that I know more than what an average student should

know. But in terms of understanding how this school's system works, I'm still pretty much ignorant."

"Hmm..." Horikita Manabu seemed to have doubts, but he decided to set them aside temporarily. *"I'll take your word for it in the meantime. For now, we should continue with the matter at hand."*

"That would be great."

"From what I've discovered, Nagumo wants to strip the school of what he considers as unnecessary policies. He wants students to be punished and rewarded based on their value. In other words, everyone will be ruled under meritocracy in a much purer, more straightforward sense of the word."

Those who don't have the abilities will fall, and those with talent will be forced to play. That's what this man had told back then.

"Alright. I get what kind of president Nagumo will be. But before I decide, I also want to know the kind of person he is."

"The kind of person Nagumo is, huh?" He thought for a bit before giving an answer. *"His abilities are excellent. Whether it's academics, athletics, or social ability, Nagumo is pretty much unrivaled in his year. Of course, some of his peers might surpass him in one or two aspects, but none of them have tried to oppose him openly."*

"That's quite the high praise, but I guess it makes sense. What about his personality then?"

"Nagumo likes to compete, but as you'd guess, he doesn't use the conventional method too often."

"You don't have to sugarcoat it. Just say that he uses underhanded tactics to get ahead. That's what we've been dealing with in Ryuen, anyway."

"I suppose that's true. However, one thing I can say about Nagumo is that he always keeps his word. Or at least, that's how it's always been ever since he started challenging me."

"That's quite reassuring then," I shrugged before making a slight change in tone. "After everything that you've said, I still can't understand why you want me to stop him. Objectively speaking, his plans aren't that bad. It does suck that my peaceful life might be put in jeopardy, but without that bias, I don't actually mind letting him do what he wants."

"It's honestly not a plan that I'm personally against, but his methods will be fatal for many students. A lot of baseless expulsions are waiting not just for those who are weak, but for those who oppose him. I don't doubt his abilities as a leader, but his arrogance makes him a tyrant. A large number of innocent students had already been expelled just because they opposed Nagumo. It didn't matter how small the issue was."

So that's how it is. A desperate move to protect...

"In other words, you want me to stop a corrupt dictator in the

making. Alright, I understand. I now have a general idea of who Nagumo Miyabi is, so I think that's enough information about him. Given your difference in grade, I doubt you'd be too familiar with his daily schedule or group of friends, so I'll do something about that on my own. For that, I want to know the bounds of what I'm allowed to do."

"You're using Suzune as a front right now, correct? You can keep using her as much as you want. I'm also allowing you to mobilize the third-years if needed."

"Oh, now that's one big favor."

"That's just how dangerous of an opponent Nagumo is. However, I am placing one condition. Any of your moves must not disrupt the competition between us third-years. I won't allow you to get involved in our matters."

"So I don't need to try and help you, even as thanks? That's really generous of you."

"I'm the one who sought your help, anyway. This much is nothing."

I initially intended to end our negotiation by using that exact argument as leverage, but he perfectly prevented me from doing so by pre-emptively offering the most ideal compensation. This guy really doesn't cut any corners.

"Alright, I'll make my move when I feel like doing so. Talking for much longer might put our positions in danger."

"I'm also in my room right now. If I used my personal number, then it might've been a bit risky, but this dummy number allows me to have a lengthy conversation with you. There's nothing to worry about."

He was usually the type to discuss things like this in person, but the opponent was someone who was too involved with him. The president knew that he couldn't disclose anything without running the risk of my existence getting noticed by Nagumo.

"I understand. I'll take care of Nagumo. And for my approach, I'll play with him from behind the curtains."

"Yes. I knew this would be a good time. After all, you've resigned yourself from the class competitions among your grade."

"Yep, but it won't be for long. In the near future, the class would need my assistance again."

"Is that so? Well, you can always put matters involving Nagumo down your priority list. It's enough that you've acknowledged this request of mine. Goodbye."

Without giving me the chance to reply, the president abruptly ended the call. That's when I noticed something strange about my notifications.

Ring!

"I haven't even sighed yet..." My phone rang with a familiar caller

ID. "Well at least, it's not an unknown number."

"Ayanokouji-kun?"

"What's up Horikita? You've called me a bunch of times now. Sorry about that."

10 missed calls-- That's a lot, especially if I consider that it's Horikita.

"I knew you were on a different call, but it was urgent, so I decided to not wait. Are you free tomorrow?"

"Are you perhaps asking me out on a date, Horikita-san?" I replied, slightly imitating the great Professor.

"What? Stop joking around. It's Ryuen-kun. He has finally decided to make contact."

Speak of the devil. Welp, it was only a matter of time, anyway.

"I see. Ryuen, huh? Alright, I'll go with you."

"Okay. Is there anything we need to prepare for?" she asked in a slightly worried tone.

"That kind of thing is up to you. I'm just here to follow your instructions. Don't forget, Horikita. *You're* the leader now, not me."

She paused for a moment before regaining her composure.

"Hmm... You're right, my bad. Let me think about this for a bit. I'll call you again if anything comes up."

"Sur-"

Beep...

Once again, the call was abruptly ended before I could say anything. Those siblings... I wonder if this kind of thing runs in their family...?

Vol. 5: Chapter 8.1 - I Don't Really Care

I was asked to come by the student council room around this time, but I don't really see anyone around the hallway.

"Oh, it's you."

Of course, that didn't last long after Ibuki came walking in the direction I was from.

"Did Ryuuen ask you to come here?" I asked.

"Obviously. I wouldn't have any business here otherwise. What about you?"

Before I could respond, the door finally opened and a pair of students came out of the room with Secretary Tachibana accompanying them. Of course, they were none other than Horikita and Ryuuen.

"Well then," she bowed slightly before closing the door once more.

"Oh, Ayanokouji. How's Kikyou doing?" he asked.

"She's cleaning her room," I replied.

"So the two of you went ahead on your own, huh?" said Ibuki.

"Kukuku. That goes without saying. As a lackey, you don't really have a place inside that room," shrugged Ryuuen.

"I'm nobody's lackey!" she spat.

The four of us started walking. We were supposed to have our talk around the resting area near the track and field.

Ryuuen stayed relaxed and unguarded as he stole glimpses from the unsurveilled hallways without cameras hidden on the ceiling. It almost felt like he had fully memorized which specific hallways didn't have any cameras monitoring them.

"The deal's over Ayanokouji-kun. We've removed all copies of the recordings that we had. If the school finds out that we're hiding any extra copies, the new contract states that the perpetrator will be penalized with expulsion, along with a deduction of 500 class points," explained Horikita.

"That's pretty hardcore."

"It's a fitting punishment for the desperate, don't you think?" Ryuuen said. "I'm quite satisfied with the terms. The damage that our recordings would've dealt to each other wasn't equal, to begin with. A lot of us might've been suspended or even expelled. Meanwhile, only Kikyou would take a hit on your end."

"What? Is there something up with that Kushida girl?" asked the confused Ibuki.

"The deal might've been in your favor, but I hope you'd refrain from talking about the details from now on," I sighed.

"Kukuku. Sure, that's my bad," he replied before facing Ibuki. "You heard what he said, Ibuki. I can't answer your question. I still have taste despite being their enemy."

"Stop your gloating, Ryuen-kun. We were also forbidden from verbally spreading anything as a condition. Even if you tell your classmates secretly, in the off chance that the information metastasizes to the student body, you and all of your accomplices will suffer the punishment."

"How scary," Ryuen scoffed, turning to us with an insidious grin. "But don't bother wasting your breath to remind me, Suzune. I don't really care either way. Regarding Kikyuu's little secret... Well, she doesn't need to worry about me."

No, she doesn't-- Not you, at least.

"Hey, Ayanokouji. Are you seriously stepping down?" Ibuki asked out of nowhere.

"Oi, Ibuki. I called you here as a listener and a witness, so all you need to do is shut up. If I wanted someone to run their mouth off, I would've brought Kaneda or Hiyori."

"I know that, but I don't see an opportunity where I can ask him this question again anytime soon. I just want an answer."

Instead of bantering with Ryuen, Ibuki gave him a serious response. Hearing that, Ryuen glanced at me.

"I'm no longer a leader. Like you, I'm just a regular member of my class," I answered.

"Why? Do you seriously think you've won just because you're in Class A now? We're just starting the second semester, you know?!" Ibuki unconsciously raised her voice.

"You've misunderstood something. It's not about me winning or anything like that. I'm just tired of standing at the forefront."

"Heh, so now you're just a callboy for that girl?" she scoffed.

"Who knows?"

A callboy, huh? That would defeat the purpose of my decision to step down. I can't call myself free if I'm at the beck and call of another person. I'm just here because I wanted to. I can easily decline Horikita's request and she wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Of course, I have no obligation of explaining any of that to Ibuki.

"Tsk... Why do you like pretending to be a harmless sheep?"

"We've talked about this before, Ibuki. *"It's not like you advertise your fighting skills in front of others, right?"* Those were the same

exact words I've told you before. And the answer should be obvious for someone like you."

"I know! It's so you can keep your enemies' guards low when they're around you. I know that. That's the basics of the basics. But it's just so... frustrating..."

As a girl, she knew full well how it felt to be seen as weak, to be underestimated, to not be taken seriously. That's probably why she's so adamant about wanting to see me go all out against her class--against her. By keeping my weak act, she feels like I'm looking down on her. Ibuki probably hates that more than how Ryuen treats her.

"I can't really do much about your frustration, Ibuki. I just want to attend this school like a normal person. I'm sorry, but I don't care how my decision makes you feel."

It was an honest, yet cruel response.

We finally reached the resting area and I gladly took a seat under the shade.

"Forgive her, Ayanokouji," smirked Ryuen. "Ibuki was the one watching our little fight on the island, right? As a fighter, she's intrigued by how strong you really are, both brain and brawn. Of course, it's the same for me. Kinda sucks to be left hanging without an answer, don't you think?"

"That's not my problem. I'm not interested in going to war."

"And that's also why I'm personally bringing the war to *you*. I'm sorry, but I don't care how my decision makes you feel."

"He got you there, Ayanokouji-kun," sighed Horikita. I don't know if she was sarcastic or just unamused, but her tone lacked any feelings.

"He sure did," I replied.

You don't have to worry, Ryuen. I already knew that right from the start.

"Are you done now? I'd like to get things going, if possible." Horikita sat beside me and put the papers on the table.

"Seems like it. Go ahead, Suzune."

Ryuen glanced at Ibuki who took a seat while clicking her tongue.

The atmosphere instantly shifted to a more business-like vibe thanks to Horikita.

"There's one thing that I'd like to confirm, and that's your stance on the sports festival. Since you really want to fight us, it's a shame that we're on the same side. We could get a clean win against Class B and Class C by fully cooperating with each other, but I personally think that working with you is a bad idea. You betrayed Katsuragi-kun during the Deserted Island Exam. Who's to say you won't do the

same thing with us for the sports festival?"

"Ohh, that's certainly a valid point. Truly a valid point." Ryuuen nodded merrily, looking pleased.

"Yes, but I'm still willing to cooperate if you yourself are willing to do so. Of course, I'll be setting up countermeasures in case you betray us."

"Hehe, don't bother. I'm not interested in any of your bullcrap. Class D will be doing its own thing. If our athletic students end up clashing with each other, then so be it. We'll be taking first place, anyway."

Ryuuen crossed his legs and leaned back, openly showing his disinterest. A stark contrast to his earlier attitude.

"Hmph, I wonder where your confidence is based from?" commented Horikita.

"You should get used to it by now," he sighed "This meeting seems pretty pointless, Suzune. You could've just asked me on the phone and I'd give you my short and honest answer."

Ryuuen stood up. He's probably done listening to whatever Horikita has to say.

"This is your leader now, Ayanokouji? What a waste of time," said the displeased Ibuki.

"Do you have any problem with me, Ibuki-san?"

"Not really. I just don't see you worth following, that's all."

"Could I interpret that as you saying you're better than me?"

"Interpret my words however you want. I don't really care."

"I see. I just find it amusing that you're running your mouth despite achieving nothing but failure." Horikita bit back.

She had ammunition. After all, she knew how I led Ibuki around by the nose during the island exam.

"Hah? Are you picking a fight with me?"

"That should be my question. Your words have no basis. I recognize that Ayanokouji-kun is a much better leader than me, but I don't want to hear that from someone incompetent like you."

Ibuki angrily walked toward the unfazed Horikita after hearing those words. I stood behind Horikita after sensing that a fight was brewing, but Ryuuen didn't stop Ibuki at all. He was even smiling. There were no cameras around and the people playing on the soccer field can't possibly see or hear us from here. I can see why he isn't worried.

"Alright, you wanna know who's better between the two of us? Why don't we find out now?"

"Are you talking about a physical fight? I don't mind taking you on, but how does that measure how one of us is objectively the better and more competent student? Won't it just be a showdown to

see who's the better fighter?"

Ibuki's nerve was popped at this point, so she didn't care about anything else anymore. A powerful kick was suddenly thrown toward Horikita. It was very fast, but Horikita managed to step back and avoid it.

"I didn't think you'd actually do something. I'm impressed and baffled at the same time."

"Still not shutting your mouth, eh? Would you stop if I make it bleed?"

"Hey, Ibuki. I think this is a bad idea," I said.

Both of them were prideful. Ibuki won't go home empty-handed and Horikita won't beg her to stop. I had no choice but to step in.

"Shut it, Ayanokouji. You'll fight me, too," she replied.

Horikita's eyes narrowed after hearing that.

"You'll fight Ayanokouji-kun...?"

"That's right."

Horikita got agitated and wanted to say something in response, but I stopped her from doing so.

"Calm down for a minute. Fighting here is pointless, so it'd be great if you refrain from kicking people."

"And why should I listen to you?" asked the irritated Ibuki.

"I have a proposal. You want to see who's better between the two of you, right? Then do it during the school festival. Choose an all-participant event to compete in and we'll make arrangements to ensure you two face each other."

I looked at Ryuen, who silently watched everything unfold with a smile.

"Ohh, wouldn't that be nice? Let's make it happen." Fortunately, he was entertained by the idea, as well.

Ibuki still looked mad. I didn't expect her to be convinced immediately, but I had a trick under my sleeve.

"To be honest, I don't really care if you guys fight, but don't do it right here and now. Think about what you're wearing, Ibuki."

With our business being inside the main campus, we were required to wear our school uniform. I was behind Horikita when Ibuki tried to kick her. Whatever it was that was accidentally shown to her, I saw, too.

"Pervert." Ibuki blushed but was too pissed to show her embarrassed expression.

"Alright, alright. Back it up. We're out of here, Ibuki. We still have some things to do." Ryuen finally stepped in and tapped Ibuki's shoulder.

He turned his back to us and started walking away. Ibuki was still annoyed, but she chose to follow Ryuen instead.

"Wait a minute, Ryuen-kun. I never told you that the discussion was over, right?" Horikita suddenly stopped him in his tracks.

"Oho? I thought you were done with this pointless meeting."

"I'm not so foolish that I'd call you and Ayanokouji-kun out here solely just for that," she replied.

Horikita glanced at me for a second, probably fishing for a reaction.

"I see. This is getting interesting. What do you have in mind?"

"There's another thing that I'd like to confirm. At the end of the Zodiac Exam, you said that no one figured it out in the end, correct?"

Ryuen's smile widened and his eyes seemed surprised. He looked at me with a delighted grin.

"Now we're talking. Do continue, Suzune. It seems like you've found an answer."

Ibuki was confused by the sudden change in topic, but she continued listening without making a noise.

"I've been thinking about what might've happened behind the scenes. And after investigating all of the notable events during the exam, I could only point towards one conclusion."

Ryuen raised his eyebrows expectantly, waiting for Horikita's answer.

"You were the one behind everything, weren't you, Ayanokouji-kun...?"

Author's Notes:

Kikyou cleaning her room during this day is canon.

Vol. 5: Chapter 8.2 - The True Mastermind

"You don't have to look so expectant, Horikita. I won't confirm or deny your claim. For now, why don't you give us an explanation?" I said.

Ryuuen took a seat, looking relaxed. Horikita and I did the same while Ibuki continued standing beside Ryuuen.

"Firstly, we'd have to consider the most vital students who participated during the exam. They would be the two of you, Katsuragi-kun, Ichinose-san, Kanzaki-kun, the former Class A's traitor, and Kouenji-kun," started Horikita. "Before I get to why I pointed my finger at Ayanokouji-kun, I'd have to give some context regarding my understanding of how the whole narrative was made."

The three of us listened in silence, letting Horikita continue as she pleases.

"The students of the former Class A were stressed about their loss during the island exam. However, Katsuragi-kun's faction wholeheartedly believed his explanation regarding a traitor inside their class. Because the traitor's actions weren't known to the rest of the class, all of them decided to cooperate in keeping the security tight. It resulted in Katsuragi-kun's decision to implement his strategy. That was Class A's initial move."

"For us, who were Class B at that time, our decision to protect our VIPs took priority. It was the job assigned to Hirata-kun and Kushida-san. In my case, I wanted to take the exam as a chance to gain more points. I tried to find a way to win which eventually lead to me trying to find the pattern. The last member of our group was Ayanokouji-kun, but he challenged us to tackle the exam by ourselves. We didn't mind his idea given how hard he worked during the previous special exam."

"For Ichinose-san's class, her initial idea was to wait it out until the end. She took this exam as an opportunity to make her classmates forge new relationships with students from other classes. After doing so, Ichinose-san would later reveal her strategy of isolating the VIP."

"Lastly, Ryuuen-kun's class. Your idea was the same as mine which was to find the pattern. Of course, both of us eventually realized how hard that would be without having the important pieces. In this case, the members' list as a whole along with a

sufficient number of VIP names in hand."

It turns out that the envelope Horikita was holding didn't just contain a copy of the new contract. Her notes regarding her investigations were also there. She carefully presented them to us while explaining her train of thought.

"With Katsuragi-kun's strategy, Ichinose-san won't have the opportunity to earn the trust of Class A students, Ryuuken-kun would be hard-pressed to solicit any sort of backdoor cooperation, and it would hurt my progress if Class A won't be in the equation. It was a total stalemate. Honestly, I thought that would be the case until the end of the exam."

"Of course, all of that changed when Kouenji-kun suddenly submitted his answer as the Monkey Group's traitor."

Horikita was right. That simple, nonchalant move by Kouenji changed the entire game. It was the most critical point of the exam which led to our class's victory.

"Each class made their own moves against the sudden change of stakes. Ichinose-san met up with us after the news reached her. We denied their suspicion that our class was targeting theirs before confirming that the VIP name Kouenji-kun entered was indeed the right one. As a result, Ichinose-san offered to give us the half-million private point reward in exchange for a VIP name."

"That's odd. Shouldn't you just deliberately submit a wrong name in a group where the VIP is from her class?" asked Ibuki.

"On the surface, that seems like the obvious move, but we've already decided on cooperating before the incident regarding Kouenji-kun happened. There were two collaborative moves that two classes can achieve if they worked together. The first one was a devastating attack while the other one was a defensive resource," replied Horikita.

"If both of you achieve Outcome #3 while targeting each other's classes, it would result in a draw with both classes having 6 VIP names. You can use that knowledge to attack the two remaining classes. Pull it off and it's an automatic win." Ryuuken continued the explanation.

"Then why didn't you do it?"

"Trust me, Ibuki. I would've *loved* to. It's the first strategy that I came up with. But then I realized that I wouldn't be able to make it work no matter what, mostly because of the Memorandum Restriction," he replied.

Unlike what he did during the Deserted Island Exam, Ryuuken can't make shady deals with anyone by abusing contracts.

"Ryuuken-kun's way of tackling things has been known to the other classes before the special exams even started. That attack would

only work if both classes have absolute trust in each other due to the absence of reliable contracts. After all, you can just give away three fake names and you'd still get the same result, but this time, with the additional rewards from betraying your ally," explained Horikita.

Ibuki carefully digested the information with a tense expression.

"Yeah... There's no way Katsuragi would trust this guy again," she said.

Ryuuen shrugged her comment off like it was a compliment.

"The defensive version can counter that attack *if and only if* done immediately. And by doing so, you'll leave the two remaining classes thinking. Should they continue trying to one-up the other, or join the first two classes in achieving a total draw? Of course, with the possibility of getting their VIPs targetted by enemies that they can't target back, they would probably choose the safer and faster option, and go for the draw," continued Horikita.

"Why should you immediately commit if you decide to play defense? Won't the school alert everyone that answers had been sent? It would've been obvious if two enemy classes were cooperating. You can just implement that defensive move after finding out that the others are attacking, right? That would leave the option to attack open for yourselves," said Ibuki.

"That's a good point, Ibuki-san, but that's under the notion that they submit the answer immediately. The school most likely included that as a defensive mechanism against such a plan, but the two cooperating classes can always find the pattern in secret. Doing so bypasses that mechanism and by the time they become aware of the situation, all twelve VIP names would've been already submitted in quick succession. The losing classes wouldn't even have the chance to make a move."

"Hmm, I get that, but it's also possible that the other two classes are cooperating themselves while doing the same strategy. They might even end up finding the pattern first."

"Then it's just a matter of skill at that point."

"No sure-win strategy from that angle, huh? That's pretty anticlimactic," she commented.

"Yes, and that's also why we opted for Outcome #3 instead of Outcome #4 during our deal with Ichinose-san. Both outcomes would result in a draw between Class B and Class C, but if we achieve the latter, we would decrease the number of vulnerable targets on our side."

"But you'd be giving up your only advantage of having 4 VIP names."

"It's the concession we chose to give them because around that

time, we weren't sure whether Ryuuken-kun really knew who the VIPs were. If he did and he suddenly decides to drop the hammer on us, then we could at least reduce the damage dealt on our class points."

"Hehh, so you really can't have it all, huh? I guess none of the available plans were invincible in the end," Ibuki shrugged.

"As things moved forward, that's when I started to become unaware of what the other classes were doing. I was focused on finding the pattern, after all. We finalized the deal with Ichinose-san and gave up on one of our VIPs. In the end, I managed to figure out the pattern, but things weren't so simple."

"Wait a minute, Suzune. So far, all of the crap you've said are things that everyone already knows. I don't mind getting a refresher, but shouldn't you get on with the big reveal?" Ryuuken commented.

"How impatient. Well, I was actually just getting to it," she replied. "You see, things started to become clear the more I analyze the details of the results."

"I worked backwards and started with the Dragon Group. During the last hour of the final day, our showdown reached its climax. At that point, almost all of the VIP names have been sent and their identities were known to me and most of my classmates. But a slew of strange things created questions in my head."

Horikita briefly glanced at me, but I continued to stay silent.

"Firstly, I get that Katsuragi-kun cooperated with Ryuuken-kun to acquire the VIP name from the Cow Group in exchange for private points while sparing their VIPs in the process. And then, Class D would submit the VIP names from the Horse Group and Tiger Group for themselves. But it's odd. Why did you choose to leave the Dragon Group and Dog Group in particular?"

"Isn't the answer already laid out? Even I was aware that my class's Dog Group members were cooperating with your class's Dog Group members under Ayanokouji's orders. I didn't really mind it," said Ryuuken.

"Of course, you didn't. If they achieved Outcome #1, the rewards would be overwhelmingly in Class D's favor. And that's exactly what happened. Ayanokouji-kun roped the Dog Group members from our class into his plan and kept it a secret from me. They didn't have any reason to do that unless he gained something in return."

"Ohh-hoho, that's excellent, Suzune. We're finally getting somewhere."

"Katsuragi-kun wanted you to do the defensive draw while there was still time, right? But you refused to do it until the very end."

"Just like I said from back then, that's because I hated it."

"I don't know if that's a lie or not and I don't really care. What I do know is that you had another reason for refusing him. Going back to Ayanokouji-kun's cooperation with Class D in the Dog Group, I don't believe that you simply *"didn't mind"*. You were also personally involved, just as much as him," declared Horikita. "The Dragon Group and Dog Group achieving Outcome #1 wasn't a mere coincidence. They were chosen deliberately for a plan that's been laid out right from the start."

"As you can see, both groups were chosen so the winning class gains the maximum reward of two and a half-million private points since the VIPs are from their respective classes while having the fourth *"extra"* student at the same time."

"Hey, hey, you're making it sound like Ayanokouji's the one moving the pieces around. Everything might've happened according to *my* wishes, you know? What if I was the one who told Ayanokouji about the Dog Group's VIP?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ryuen-kun. The answer becomes obvious once you look at the overall result. *Our* class won. If it was really your plan, then there's no way that would be the case. I fell for your ruse about knowing who the VIPs were, and so did Katsuragi-kun and Ichinose-san. You never knew them-- at least not until the very last day." Horikita turned to me with a glare. "You were the only one who knew about the VIP names, Ayanokouji-kun. Now, I'm sure of it."

"The hell? Everyone including those brainiacs in Katsuragi's class was scrambling to find that silly pattern, and you were the only one who actually got them on the final day along with Ryuen. So you're saying that Ayanokouji figured it out way earlier than you?" asked Ibuki.

"Yes. The deal with the Dog Group wouldn't have been successfully orchestrated if it wasn't part of a long-running plan where he knew every group's VIP."

"Hey, you. When did you figure out the pattern?" Ibuki asked me.

"Who knows? I don't really remember the exact moment and time," I replied.

"Ugh, it's such a waste of time to ask you," she rolled her eyes.

"It was during the night of the first day," Horikita had an answer to Ibuki's question. "We had a conversation regarding the number of names required to figure out the pattern. Ayanokouji-kun had something in mind, but he didn't continue and asked for my opinion instead."

She turned to me while explaining.

"I told you that we needed at least three other names to crack the code, right? In other words, six names in total. However, that

wasn't the case for you. You asked for my opinion first so you wouldn't accidentally reveal that you're able to solve the pattern with just four names. With that in mind, you should've figured everything out right after Kouenji-kun told you the identity of his group's VIP."

"Seriously? That fast?" commented Ibuki.

"After that, you asked Hirata-kun to contact us immediately, but you didn't come with him because you had another *"business"* to attend to. When I asked you about what you did that night, you told me that you were trying to find Chabashira-sensei on the 5th deck. That was a lie, wasn't it? You were actually meeting up with Ryuuen-kun to pitch this plan."

"Kukuku. Oi, Ayanokouji. Suzune's exposing all your dirty secrets over here. Aren't you gonna defend yourself?" Ryuuen addressed me with a smug grin.

Horikita and Ibuki looked at me with anticipation. At this point, the only thing I could do was sigh.

"That's incredible, Horikita. You actually figured it out," I leaned back with my arms crossed. "You're right. I was the true mastermind behind everything that happened during the Zodiac Exam."

"So you were in on it the whole time, huh, Ryuuen?" said Ibuki.

"Guess so. I don't mind cooperating with the guy if he's gonna give me a free pass on that lost cause of an exam. It ended before I could even think up of another plan."

Kouenji broke the balance, so I had to make a move. If I stayed passive, Ryuuen would be able to overwhelm Horikita with whatever plan he had in mind.

"Huh-? Wait, what...? Hey, wait a minute. If you already knew the pattern, then why didn't you just tell your classmates and end the exam in one go? Your class would've gained a lot more points. There's no reason for you to cooperate with Ryuuen since you've basically won already." Ibuki was understandably confused.

"Knowing Ayanokouji-kun, I think it's because he thought it wasn't necessary. He won us the bare minimum number of class points required to become Class A. All of that so he could step down as our leader."

"Geez, you must've hated leading your class, Ayanokouji," he said. "Sorry to hear that Suzune, but you finding that pattern and telling everyone was just a part of this guy's plan. Although I'm sure he would've done it himself if you couldn't do it."

"You're wrong, Ryuuen," I replied. "I needed Horikita to figure out the pattern herself. That's the only way I could show everyone in

our class that she has the potential to become a capable leader."

"Heh, is that so?" he scoffed before looking at Horikita. "What's with that face, Suzune? You don't have to feel too bad, you know? In the end, you solved the puzzle yourself with just four names, just like Ayanokouji. Isn't that amazing?"

"Shut up, Ryuuken-kun. I'm not an idiot. After finding out the truth, I realized how much Ayanokouji-kun indirectly helped me with finding the pattern. Whenever we discussed my so-called *"progress"*, he would sprinkle hints without being explicit about it. In the end, those hints were the reason why I figured out the pattern." She faced me with a defeated expression. "Say, Ayanokouji-kun... I was just dancing on the palm of your hand this whole time, wasn't I? No-- all of us were. Ryuuken-kun already gave me the answer back then but I didn't get it. Everything was just a part of a script-- *your* script."

"You didn't really have to put it that way, but yeah, I guess so," I shrugged.

"I see," Horikita sighed and fixed her belongings. "Well, it's not like I have any right to be offended. In the end, you did what was best for the class."

"That's it? How boring. I was waiting for you to get depressed and insecure," Ryuuken ridiculed her.

"I don't have time to feel such things, Ryuuken-kun. And also, I must thank you and Ibuki-san for being here. Your presence was necessary so I can prevent Ayanokouji-kun from evading my confrontation."

"Keh, don't get ahead of yourself, Suzune. You're, at most, an enemy that could entertain me. You shouldn't start acting arrogant just because you solved another puzzle."

"Of course. I recognize the disparity between Ayanokouji-kun's abilities and mine. I'm his classmate and friend. I don't need *you* to remind me."

Ryuuken sneered before standing up.

"You're weak, Suzune. That's why you lose. Even if your opponent is better than you in one aspect, you just have to crush them in another. There are tons of ways to thoroughly decimate an enemy. Ichinose, Sakayanagi, or even Ayanokouji are not an exception to that."

"So you still intend to fight Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I'm just trying to finish what I've started. After I eliminate you and that doll-faced bastard, maybe Sakayanagi can stave off the inevitable boredom that comes next after I win."

Ryuuken walked away without looking back. Ibuki was also glaring at us, but she followed Ryuuken soon after, leaving Horikita

and me behind.

Author's Notes:

Even with just **three** names, Kiyotaka would easily figure out the pattern as long as he had access to the members' lists. Making Suzune and the others think that he needed **four** names is just another stunt.

Remember, the main reason why he couldn't do so in the canon was his horrendous social connections. Meanwhile, Suzune basically handed him the answer after sending that spreadsheet. We managed to follow Suzune's thought process when she finally figured it out, but Kiyotaka's problem-solving skills would've been more straightforward and efficient, and much faster.

Vol. 5: Chapter 8.3 - To Hold On

"What an ordeal that was," I said.

Horikita and I faced each other. Now that Ryuuen and Ibuki are gone, I can finally have her explain what just happened.

"So? What was that all about, Horikita?"

"Hmph, of course, you'd sense that something was off," she replied.

"That's obvious. You wouldn't organize this whole meeting just to expose me in front of someone who already knew everything that happened. Ryuuen was my accomplice, after all."

Horikita sighed and leaned her back.

"I was trying to help you. I tried, but Ryuuen-kun didn't take the bait."

"You'd tried to help me? What do you mean?"

"You're making me angry, Ayanokouji-kun. Could you please stop playing dumb?" she glared. "You already knew why, right from the start, don't you? My plan was beneficial to you. That's the only reason why you said yes about coming here in the first place. If it were an inconvenience, then you would've declined."

The conversation went to a brief pause before I finally responded.

"Do you really think that, Horikita?"

"I'm a hundred percent sure."

Her resolute expression was admirable. If I continued playing the fool, I'll start feeling like the bad guy. Well, Horikita worked hard today, so I guess I'll give her the satisfaction of being right.

"I won the Zodiac Exam behind everyone's backs. We got to Class A and I managed to step down. However, as much as I wanted a peaceful life, Ryuuen wants to continue fighting me. That's why you continued investigating what really happened on the exam. You arranged this meeting to show that you've figured me and Ryuuen out-- to show that you have the ability to keep up with us. That way, Ryuuen would find you interesting, and hopefully, he'll want to fight you instead of me."

"So you *do* know."

"Yeah. Sorry about that," I shrugged. "But I should also thank you. The plan might not have worked, but I really appreciate it."

"You wanted peace. I thought I should at least help you get that much. You've already done so much for the class, anyway."

"I was happy, you know? You called me your friend earlier, right?"

"W-What are you... E-Eherm... Don't sweat the small details. It's nothing special." Horikita was caught off-guard, but she immediately regained her composure. "Anyway, my little scheme to veer Ryuen-kun's attention away from you failed. What do you plan to do now?"

"The other reason why I chose Ryuen as my accomplice was to display the gap in our abilities. I wanted to discourage him from targeting me by showing him how I formulate plans that he can't defeat."

"But it had the opposite effect, didn't it? That means he still thinks he can defeat you even with your display of intellect and ingenuity. What are you going to do?"

"Well, this result was still within my expectations. I'll just crush him thoroughly the moment he decides to come at me."

"I see... Then I guess I don't have to worry."

"I'm glad that you feel that way, but you need to worry about the class more than anything else."

"What? I'm not worried about *you* in particular-- not in the least. I'm worried about whatever you've got cooked up that in that head of yours."

It would've been alright if she was just being shy, but the way Horikita spoke... She was saying the cold, hard truth.

"You could've at least lied to make me feel better, you know...?" I sighed.

"I know I've been your pawn ever since the class competition started and that's fine, but I'm worried that you'll use me again without my knowledge. If you want my help, then just say so. And if I somehow become a part of your plans, then at least let me know."

"That's true. Ignorance is the last thing you'd want, especially as a leader."

"Oh, it's rare to see students around here. What are you guys doing?"

An unexpected guy arrived from an adjacent area. He was wearing a jersey, and sweat could be seen trickling all over his face. Since he didn't come from the field, he must've been jogging around, instead. Horikita stared at him with her head slightly tilted. I didn't speak either.

"Ah, my bad, my bad. It's disrespectful of me to suddenly barge in on someone else's date. You don't have to mind me. I was just running around to warm up. I'll join the guys at the soccer club, soon. Bye~."

He started walking away with a smile, but Horikita spoke up to stop him.

"Please wait a minute,"

"Hm?"

"Please forgive me if it turns out that I'm just assuming things, but did you really talk to us out of pure chance and curiosity?"

"What makes you think that I didn't?"

Instead of giving the answer straight out, he decided to indulge in Horikita's peculiar question.

"Once again, please forgive me if I'm being pretentious, but I thought you just wanted to make a conversation with me."

"With you, eh?"

"Yes, with me. Not because I'm a notable 1st-year student or anything like that... but because I'm Nii-san's-- Horikita Manabu's little sister. Please correct me if I'm wrong, Nagumo Miyabi-senpai."

"Haha, interesting, quite interesting. Well, to give you the answer, it's a combination of all of them. I finished warming up and coincidentally saw Horikita-senpai's little sister. I did try to strike up a conversation simply out of curiosity, but you're also right that your identity reinforced my will to do it," he explained. "Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, thank you very much."

"Does Horikita-senpai know that you have a boyfriend?"

"Ayanokouji-kun is not my boyfriend, but I get why you'd come to such a misunderstanding."

"Your composure reminds me of your older brother," he shrugged.

"Well, anyway, I knew that right from the start. I just thought it would be fun to do a little teasing. Do enjoy your time inside the campus. You can watch us play if you want. Who knows? The things you'll see might prove useful for the upcoming sports festival."

"I see... Since some Class B and Class C students are also part of the Soccer Club, then it might be worth our time," she muttered.

Before Nagumo could create a considerable distance between us, he turned around to address Horikita once more.

"By the way, if you're willing, then you're free to join the student council. The two of us might not be completely the same, but we're similar in some regards. We weren't admitted to Class A, but we rose to the top as our class's leader. I'd want someone as capable as you under my wing. What do you say?"

"Thank you for the offer, Nagumo-senpai. I'll think about it."

Nagumo waved his hand as he continued walking away.

"It's not like you to provoke someone out of nowhere," I said.

"He's not just *someone*... Ichinose-san talked about him before,

didn't she? Nagumo-senpai is the person who always challenges my brother. If he can keep that up for more than a year, then he's probably capable enough that he's not losing too horribly."

"That's pretty harsh on Nagumo. You think your brother is always the winner?"

"I *know* he is always the winner. That's just how it is, considering that it's him."

"You really have a lot of faith in him. What if I try to fight your brother? Do you think I can win against him?"

It seemed like a natural follow-up question, but Horikita's tongue suddenly got tied.

"That's..."

"I see... So from your point of view, we're more or less on the same level, huh? That's probably the highest form of compliment that I could ever receive from you."

"I never said that!"

I kept Horikita close to me during my conquest to overtake Class A. Because I showed her what I'm capable of, she couldn't count me out without hesitating. Along with the fact that I did what no one could do in such a short amount of time, it would make sense for her to think that.

"I'm kidding," I said "I honestly don't really care. Your brother is an amazing person, after all."

"Results speak for themselves, that's all that there is to it," she sighed.

"Alright, alright. Going back to my previous concern, why did you go out of your way to confront him like that?"

"His goal was probably to see what kind of person Horikita Manabu's little sister was. If I didn't say anything, I'd appear ignorant. And if I didn't push as far as I did, I'd appear weak. Personally, I didn't mind if he thought any of that, but I don't want to shame my brother."

"So the reason was him, after all. Was that okay, though? You've got his attention now."

"I don't really know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, but it definitely benefits you, who doesn't want any attention. He even treated you like air earlier."

"You've also done that before."

"Don't hold it against me," replied Horikita.

After the brief silence following that banter, Horikita smiled.

"You've really changed," I said.

"Have I now?"

Horikita stood up and started walking towards the field. Maybe she wasn't interested in hearing any elaboration to my comment. I

followed her silently until we reached the bleacher area.

"If he's the vice president of the student council, I wonder if it's okay for him to be a member of a club?"

"I wonder," she dismissed Nagumo's existence while focusing on the others. "That's Shibata Sou-kun from Class C and Sonoda Masashi-kun from Class D."

"Hirata is skilled, for sure. The same goes for Shibata and the other freshmen, but..."

"They're easily getting beaten by Nagumo-senpai. Not just the freshmen. The 2nd-years and 3rd-years aren't an exception." Even if she didn't recognize him as her brother's rival, she was still impressed with Nagumo's display of athleticism.

"He's in a completely different league."

I was vaguely aware of what the game was like a while ago, but now that Nagumo's in the field, everything felt different. The first play almost revolved around him entirely. He's a reliable teammate which also makes him a dangerous opponent.

Hirata and the others couldn't keep up with his dribbling skills. His ball control and passing accuracy were also insane.

"Everyone suddenly looks tired," I said.

The game might've been centered around Nagumo now, but it's actually pretty helpful to us. Horikita and I can roughly assess someone's general athletic skill depending on how long they can last against him. It didn't really matter if it was offense or defense.

After some time, Horikita and I stopped watching the game. We didn't want to bother Hirata, so we took off before they could take a break.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked.

"I'm going to continue everything that I've started for the school festival. Apart from me and Hirata-kun, no one else would have access to the finalized version of the participation table. Countermeasures in case of injury have also been put in place. Kouenji-kun absence will surely hurt us, but we'll just have to play around it. Those and other things."

"Then I guess there's no need for me to be worried."

"Yes, leave it to us. We'll try our best to hold on."

Yeah, I look forward to seeing that.

SS.25 - The Fifth Deck

1st Day, 9:45 PM.

After eating, we split up and decided to go back to our respective rooms. Hirata and I saw Yukimura and Kouenji doing their own thing. And by that, I meant Yukimura looking at his phone-- and Kouenji... enthusiastically doing his push-ups.

"Ah, Hirata, Ayanokouji, you two are finally here. I wanted to talk about the exam. Can I have some of your time?" Yukimura asked.

"Of course, Yukimura-kun," replied Hirata.

"Sure," I followed.

He told us what happened during the Rabbit Group's second group discussion.

"I don't know if she did that on purpose, but Karuizawa just made their hate for her skyrocket because of it..." Yukimura sighed.

"I mean, I'd be mad too if someone stepped on my foot and just ran off without a sincere apology," I shrugged.

"Hirata, aren't you going to do anything about Karuizawa's actions? She was also flirting with some Class A dude, you know?" he said.

"I'll be sure to talk to her about it. I want to hear Karuizawa-san's side before making a judgment," Hirata replied with a thinking expression.

"Well, Karuizawa's issue aside, did you really not find any clues about the VIPs' assignment?" I asked.

"No, unfortunately. Class A shut themselves off from the rest of the group. And apart from me, Hamaguchi was the only guy that proactively tried to progress the discussions. I guess that works in our favor since Karuizawa and Kushida are the VIPs for our respective groups, but unless we figure out that mystery pattern, all of this will end in a stalemate." Yukimura shook his head.

If things continue this way, then I'll have to make a move myself. I can't really force a win even if I could. Ending the exam this way would be detrimental to the class's development, especially Horikita. However, it'll be different if, at least, a fourth name is revealed to them.

Kouenji started humming while the three of us were talking. Yukimura got upset after holding on for so long. He stood up and faced him, clearly frustrated.

"Kouenji, would you drop the happy-go-lucky act already? We're not asking you to take things seriously, but you need to participate, at the very least. We don't want you to screw things up again like last time."

Of course, Kouenji didn't care.

"If you're talking about the island fiasco, I couldn't exactly help it. I was in awful shape. I couldn't force myself to do the impossible," he replied without stopping his push-ups.

"No one here is stupid! You just faked being ill to get out!"

Nobody would buy his excuse, but Kouenji already knew that. I personally tried to stop him, but I didn't really care whether he retired or not. I knew we would win in the end, anyway.

After a few seconds, Kouenji stopped exercising. He stood up and grabbed a towel to wipe his neck.

"My, this test is nothing but troublesome, wouldn't you say?" Kouenji-kun suddenly commented on the Zodiac test.

"Troublesome? You're not even thinking about this test at all!" argued Yukimura.

"Well, there isn't any point in continuing a test that doesn't interest me, is there? Finding a liar is simple."

Kouenji grabbed his phone and started typing something. After a few seconds, all of our phones received a notification.

[The test has now ended for the Monkey Group. Those in the Monkey Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]

"Monkey Group? Hey, that's your group, Kouenji!" shouted Yukimura.

"Of course. And now, I finally have my freedom, once again. Adieu."

Kouenji tossed his phone on the bed.

The balance is broken.

"Wait, Kouenji," I called out to him.

"You've gotta be kidding... This guy just..." Yukimura shook his head in dismay.

"Hm? Do you have anything to say to me, *Ayanokouji*?" Kouenji gave me a side glance.

"The name you put in-- Do you think you triggered Outcome #3?" I asked.

"Hmph. This so-called '*special exam*' is nothing more than a simple quiz for me. I just said so a few seconds ago, did I not? Spotting a liar is child's play," he replied, combing his hair with a *fwish*.

"Who was it then?"

Hirata and Yukimura felt the sudden change in atmosphere and listened silently. They knew the significance of knowing the VIP's

name.

"Why should I tell you?"

It would've been better if he was at least a bit more cooperative, but this is still within my expectations.

"Let's make a deal then. If you tell me the name, I won't bother asking you to participate in the next special exam."

I had the power to make that judgment for now. I'll make sure to relay this deal to Horikita once she becomes the leader. We've been doing fine without Kouenji's help, anyway.

"Oh? A measly name in exchange for peace? That is surely tempting." Kouenji grinned while holding his chin. "However, it's not quite tempting enough."

"Of course, that's not the only offer that I have for you" I walked up to him and whispered. "You don't care about the class because you have your own way of securing a position in Class A. But the seniors aren't that dumb. Sooner or later, they'll make a move against you. But if you tell me the VIP's name, then I'll see to it that your method will be more viable in the future."

I made sure that Hirata and Yukimura didn't hear what I said. Even if they try to ask me, I can always convey that it's not something I can tell them. I know they wouldn't dare pry.

"Hoh... I see. Very well, boy. You've got yourself a deal." Kouenji-kun snorted lightly as he turned around. "Minamikata Kozue. I believe that was her name."

Given my potential connections with the upperclassmen, Kouenji knew that I wasn't all talk.

He closed the bathroom door with a hum.

Minamikata Kozue from Class C... Well, that pretty much confirms my theory. He's telling the truth.

"I see. Thanks, Kouenji." I turned to face the other two. "Alright, it's about time we take a look at our phones, Hirata. I'm sure yours had been vibrating for a while now, too."

I'm sure Horikita and the others were worried about what just happened.

"Sorry, Yukimura. The two of us will head out for while," I said. "Hirata, go up to the fourth deck and talk things out with Horikita and the others."

"How about you?" he asked.

"I have some other business to attend to," I replied.

The two of us got out of the room.

"What did you tell Kouenji-kun to make him agree with you?"

Hirata looked troubled. He probably felt guilty about asking that question since he knew I wanted to keep things buried.

"He'd probably want the details to be kept between the two of us,

so I won't say anything specific. But basically, I gave him an offer he can't refuse."

I'll frame it that way. I still needed Hirata's trust, after all.

I made my way to the fifth deck after sending the message. This wasn't the type of meeting that he'd want to pass up on. I waited behind the railings and stared at the ocean.

"I'm not baiting you for an ambush, Ryuuken."

I sensed his presence draw near, but he stopped beside a corner for whatever reason.

"Kukuku. Do you have a radar on you or something? How did you even know I was there?" he asked, looking amused.

I would've let him stay for however long he wanted, but I can't waste too much time here.

"I just saw you walk by."

He approached me with a relaxed smile. If he got there first and stayed without moving, then there was no way I could've have sensed him.

"From that corner? Sure you did," he chuckled. "Anyway, I think I know why you called me here. The Monkey Group was done in, huh? Isn't it pretty interesting? That annoying deadlock was finally torn to pieces. I can finally make my move."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

His confidence wasn't unfounded. Sooner or later, he'll be able to overwhelm Horikita.

"So? Why did you call me here? Are you going to beg for mercy? I can spare your class as long as you give me a good deal, you know?"

Well, it's unfortunate for him, but he's not in a position to do any of that now.

"You misunderstand, Ryuuken. I'm the one who's going to spare your class."

Ryuuken frowned for a second, but he widened his smirk as if to challenge my words.

"Kukuku. What are you saying, Ayanokouji?"

"Yoshimoto Kousetsu," I uttered.

Hearing that name, his smile finally faded.

"Do you still think I'm joking around, Ryuuken?"

"Hehh... Now, this is a lot more interesting..."

"So you still think I'm bluffing, huh?"

"So what if I do?"

"Frankly, I'm disappointed."

"I dare you."

He's the one who's bluffing. The moment I said Yoshimoto's name,

Ryuuen already knew he'd lost.

"Nakaizumi Izumi. Morofuji Rika."

"Well, I'll be damned." Ryuuen's unsettling smile returned. "You really are the real deal, Ayanokouji."

"I don't need your compliments. Let's just move on with what I need you to do."

Clang

Ryuuen kicked the railings, forcefully taking his turn in the conversation.

"Hold the fuck up. You may have figured out the VIPs from my class, but you're damn wrong if you think you can make me your pawn," he replied with a strong tone.

"You can stop playing dumb, Ryuuen. You already know that it's not just the VIPs from your class. I've already figured out the pattern. The last thing I need to do is tell my classmates to send in the names."

"Do you think I care? I was planning to win this exam, but there's no point in trying to do that now. You've already figured out the pattern. Any sort of resistance is pointless. You have no reason to tell me any of this... Unless, of course-- you *do* have a reason."

"That's none of your business, isn't it? The only thing that you should think about right now is to accept my terms if you want to salvage some points."

Ryuuen's patience was on the brink of collapse. I'm sure he's itching to use violence against me right now, but that's a card he should play later on. He briefly glanced towards the security camera pointed at us, and sighed.

"Kukuku. Alright, fine. You win. But if I don't like your *"terms"*, I'm leaving. You can crush us for all I care. It's just one exam, anyway."

Ryuuen wasn't bluffing this time. He was serious. Not that I'm worried about it, though.

"Up to five million private points from the rewards and a zero-point decrease in Class D's class points," I said. "You can even get more from Katsuragi depending on how well you could bargain with him."

"Hohh?"

"I'm not trying to haggle with you. If that's not enough, then you can forget about getting anything in the first place. I don't want to waste my time. I know you're on the same boat."

"Heh, whatever your agenda is should be pretty important then. This is almost too good to be true. But considering how much lead your class has against mine, I guess it's not that surprising for you to give me this much of a leeway."

"We'll be the ones who'll benefit the most in the end. Your end of the deal isn't anything amazing, in my opinion."

"That could be true," he shrugged. "Alright, let's hear it. How do you plan on making everyone dance to your tune?"

A gust of cold wind rushed through my face. This sensation was something I can never get used to.

"I want Horikita to figure out the pattern on her own and win in the end. She'll probably make deals with Ichinose, so you can act as their competitor with Class A. Hashimoto and the rest of Sakayanagi's faction are under watch because of the island exam, so you'll have more freedom in making contact with Katsuragi."

"That sounds good, but how would Suzune even figure it out?"

"She will. Normally, you'd need six names to figure out the pattern. But if she knows four names, then it's possible as long as I help her out here and there."

"Kukuku. I see. So that's what you're going for. It should be pretty entertaining."

"You'll pose as someone who *might have* figured out the pattern. As long as they think you're a threat, everything should go smoothly."

"Given the number of points you're offering me, and how your class is still going to win by the end, I assume you're going to go for Outcome #1."

"That's right. Our group, the Dragon Group, will trigger Outcome #1. There are four of us, and the VIP is from our class. That'll yield two and a half million points for Class B. In exchange, we'll arrange Outcome #1 for Class D, as well."

"Yoshimoto's Dog Group, right? We'll get two and a half million points for that, as well."

"Exactly," I nodded.

"I like it, but how would I negotiate with Katsuragi? I'm sure he wants some proof that I really know the pattern. If we follow what you said earlier, then I'd have to give him at least one VIP name as a bargaining chip."

"We can use one of Class C's VIPs. It'll give Katsuragi the same advantage of having four VIP names, but I doubt he could figure out the pattern before Horikita does."

"Suzune will get some assistance from you. Of course, he can't win the race." Ryuuen shrugged. "Once you give me that name, I might join the race myself."

"Feel free. Ichinose will also have four names down the road, so she may or may not join in."

"Hahaha, this is fucking ridiculous." Ryuuen shook his head in amusement. "So? Did you have anything to do with what happened

in the Monkey Group?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't think you did. Someone from your class did it. They figured out who the VIP from the Monkey Group is and submitted their answer. You asked for the name and they told you. That's how you figured out the pattern," he explained.

"There's no way to confirm if we got the right answer. How are you so sure about that story?"

"Because everything falls into place," Ryuen answered. "A member of the Monkey Group from Class B who's insane enough to submit an answer thinking that he got it right. Only one student fits the bill, right?"

"You've done your homework."

"Don't be cocky, Ayanokouji. I don't half-ass my hunt. Anyone who's decent enough to play with me will be on my radar," he chuckled. "And besides, I'm the living proof of my own deduction. If my story wasn't right, then how else would you figure out who the VIPs from my class are?"

"I guess so."

"I don't think we can make contact after this, so you gotta tell me everything while you still can."

"It's fine. I'll have someone contact you in the future. It'll give you the signal whether Horikita had succeeded in decoding the pattern."

"Isn't that too risky? Why not do it yourself?"

"There's probably going to be a time when I'll be compelled to show my phone to everyone. It's better to have a completely clean record of everything."

"Well, whatever," he scoffed. "So the Dragon Group's VIP is from your class, after all. Who is it? Is it you?"

"You don't need to know that right now," I replied.

"I guess not, but I'll know in the end. I might even figure everything out before Suzune and take all the rewards for myself."

"As I said, feel free to try."

It's not like I haven't thought of any measures against a potential betrayal. No matter what Ryuen tries to do, it won't change a thing. This exam is a done deal.

Vol. 5: Chapter 9.1 - Before the Tempest

Everyone worked their hardest during practice over the course of the next week. Before we knew it, the day to submit our participation table has come and we had one week left to prepare before the sports festival.

"I've tallied the results for every student in my own notes. They were the main basis of how I grouped everyone for the upcoming sports festival. The participation table will be submitted today after class." Hirata was currently behind the podium, announcing Class A's current plan of action.

"Aren't you gonna show us?" asked Ike.

"You don't have to worry, Ike-kun. These are all based on the numbers. There were no biases involved in assigning each of you," explained Horikita.

"No, no. I get that. I just wanted to see the list for myself. I'm sure everyone's thinking of the same thing."

Most of our classmates nodded. They seem to agree with what Ike was saying.

"I'm sorry, but we can't do that for security purposes."

Ike's eyebrows furrowed along some of the girls.

I secretly took a glance at two particular people and checked their reactions.

"Security purposes? It makes sense that you're worried about the participation getting leaked, but isn't that going too far?" wondered Maezono.

"I agree. It's like you don't trust us. And besides, isn't it a pretty shitty move to have us compete blindly? It might put us at a disadvantage." Karuizawa, the representative of Class A's girls, voiced her verdict.

"It's not about trust, Karuizawa-san. The sports festival is a bit unique in terms of participation, so you're not going in *completely* blind, or at least, that's how it is for most of you who are only competing in the All-Participant events," answered Horikita.

"What do you mean...?"

"At the end of the day, you'll be participating in all nine events. The only thing that you wouldn't know would be the order in which you'll go. But that doesn't really matter since you don't even know the order in which your opponents will go, anyway. Am I wrong?"

The class started to murmur. Their previous concerns didn't feel like it was that big of a deal, all of a sudden.

"Hmm... I guess that makes sense. The only ones who should feel weirded out about this are the ones competing for the Recommended-Participants events."

"Don't worry Karuizawa-san. We've already consulted those who were picked for at least one event. They've agreed on being in the dark about the specifics."

"Well... If you've thought about it in advance, then I guess it's fine." Karuizawa ended in such a fashion, which was pretty unusual. (1)

After hearing Horikita and Hirata's explanations, most of our classmates were then influenced by Karuizawa's convinced attitude.

"Ehhh, but I kinda wanna see when I'm going in, though. It's not like anyone's gonna betray the class and sell it out," said Yamauchi.

"Stop that, Haruki. Just agree with what Horikita-chan and Hirata are saying. Do you wanna get chewed out again?" Hondou interfered.

"Of course, not! But it's not like I'm saying anything bad, right?"

"We know, but you have to understand where they're coming from. We need to up our chances of winning as much as we can. Even now, the risk of a leak is not zero. And it'll only go higher the more we're in the know," he explained.

"Geez, Yamauchi. Does Hondou need to speak some sense to you every time?" teased Kikuchi.

"Hondou-kun is right," smirked Rino. "You might want to refrain from running your mouth, lest Karuizawa-san gets pissed at you again."

Yamauchi reflexively glanced at Karuizawa who was already staring at him with her eyes narrowed. He instantly looked away from her in a panic.

"S-Shut up! I got it, okay? I won't complain anymore!" The nervous Yamauchi immediately backpedaled.

Hondou's calm interruption along with Kikuchi and Rino's light-hearted teasing made the class laugh. It was entirely different from before when Karuizawa mercilessly tore Yamauchi and Ike down (mostly Yamauchi) and made the class a bit nervous.

Hirata smiled after seeing the usual liveliness of the class. Little did he know that a storm was approaching, and it won't wait for him nor Horikita before striking.

Author's Notes:

This chapter-part is pretty short since it's something of a prologue. Didn't know I needed to point that out since some peeps are still complaining about the length. I thought it was obvious enough considering how I'm labeling chapter-parts accordingly with "n.1", "n.2", etc. but apparently not. Some still think that every upload is a full chapter when that's not often the case.

1. This should be the part where Kei goes "Well, if Hirata-kun says so, then I also agree!" but since she wanted to help increase Horikita's reputation inside the class, she agreed with the two of them, instead.

Vol. 5: Chapter 9.2 - Folly

September 27th, 3:31 PM.

"Sudou-kun, can I talk to you for a second? You don't have club today, right?" Horikita walked up to Ken, who was preparing to leave the classroom.

"It's 'bout the sports festival, I'm bettin'?" he replied.

"Yes. I would prefer if we talk about it somewhere secluded."

Many of our classmates were paying attention to their conversation, so it was a pretty bold thing to say so candidly. But then again, if it's about the sports festival, all of us have already agreed with Horikita's stealth strategy.

"Aight, sure. But I want Kiyotaka to come with us."

Ken looked at me with a serious expression. Some of our classmates turned to me, as well.

"Ayanokouji-kun? Why is that?" asked Horikita.

"I ain't so sure myself, but that's my condition." Ken crossed his arms as if he was prepared to wait for Horikita's answer but to his surprise, Horikita didn't waver an inch.

"You're in luck, then. Ayanokouji could already be considered as someone who's *"partially involved"* in this particular matter, so it's fine." Horikita turned around and walked out. "Let's go. I'm leaving the submission to you, Hirata-kun."

"Don't worry Horikita-san. I'll be sure to submit our participation table after we close up the classroom," he said.

"You really don't have to, Hirata-kun. It's not like you're on duty today..." said Azuma. She was one of the students who are assigned for today.

"It's fine, Azuma-san. Everyone has been working hard for the past few weeks. I could at least help you guys finish faster. You'll be able to have more rest that way."

"Sheesh, Hirata. We're always grateful for your kindness, but don't pass out on us before the sports festival because of a fever, okay? Most of us are wimpy and lanky, so losing you would be- Ack-?!" Onizuka's words were promptly stopped by a head smack from Makida. "Ow! That hurt, Sumu!"

"Shut up, you idiot," he said before looking at Hirata. "Don't mind him, Hirata. It's just his stupid way of telling you to not force yourself. All of us feel the same way."

"Yes, you don't have to worry. I know Onizuka-kun didn't mean anything bad."

Hirata has been proactive in helping the class in every possible way this month. Whenever he's not attending to his club or going on an after-school date with Karuizawa, he always spares some time to help out after class. That and his consistent leadership alongside Horikita when preparing for the sports festival... No wonder everyone was working hard. It's difficult to not get infected by Hirata's fervor.

September 27th, 3:34 PM.

The three of us arrived on the third floor to an empty hallway that connects a lot of vacant rooms (used for some club activities) to the main classrooms.

"Before anything else, I want to ask something just to make things clear. What's with Sudou-kun demanding your presence here? Is this a part of some sort of plan?" asked Horikita.

She wasn't angry or anything. She was just curious.

"No, not this time. Even I was surprised about this," I replied.

"Don't worry, Horikita. I don't know if Kiyotaka has somethin' planned or anythin' like that, but this certainly ain't part of it," he said.

"Then why? You said you weren't sure, but there's no way that's really the case, right?" she pried.

"Yeah. I thought that even if Kiyotaka's no longer the leader, he should still hear about this."

"You don't even know what I'm going to be talking about. What makes you think that Ayanokouji-kun needs to hear whatever our discussion would be?"

"Call it a gut feeling. You're the leader and I'm gonna be the lead athlete 'part from Hirata and Kiyotaka. I immediately assumed that this was goin' to be important. Was that wrong?" Ken explained.

Horikita put on a thinking face before facing him.

"You're sharper than I thought." (1)

"I've been 'round Kiyotaka for so long now. You could say that I was influenced by him even if it's just a lil' bit. Aren'tcha the same?" smirked Ken.

"I guess you're right," Horikita sighed.

"I'm right here, you know? Can you stop talking about me and get on with it?" Their conversation was starting to go in an embarrassing direction (for me), so I urged them to get to the point.

"To be honest, it's not that important... to the class, at least." Horikita started the discussion with a slightly guilty expression.

"What do ya mean?"

"In the last event, which is the 1200-meter Relay... According to the data, you're our first choice as the team's anchor."

"Me? Hmm... I get that, but I think Kiyotaka's a better choice. I'm confident with my runnin' speed, but wasn't Kiyotaka faster than me durin' practice?"

Ken and I were the top two runners during practice. Our times were 11.14 seconds and 11.05 seconds for the 100-meter dash, respectively. And for the 200-meter dash, they were 21.43 seconds and 21.19 seconds, respectively. We were extremely close, but I was always a bit faster than him.

"That's beside the point. Ayanokouji-kun has already requested to be the first person to run."

During a relay, the best strategy was to have the second-fastest person be the first runner followed by the third-fastest, and so on. The fastest runner would always come last as the team's anchor.

"Our times were very close. So I thought it didn't really matter."

"Ohh, I guess that's a good strategy if you don't wanna stand out," Ken shrugged. He knew me as a person, so he understood what I wanted to do.

"The fastest person behind the two of you was Hirata-kun with me following shortly after. Onodera-san would be our fifth runner, and the sixth runner to complete the line-up would either be Kushida-san or Matsushita-san, according to the numbers. I was supposed to optimize our roster, but I wanted to have the anchor position for this race." Horikita's seriousness made Ken curious.

"I personally don't wanna go against your decision since you're the leader. And it's not like you're replacin' someone for a slower runner. You're just tweakin' the order," he said. "But that makes me curious. What's this, all of a sudden? Accordin' to what ya said earlier, Kiyotaka's already partially involved. Whatcha mean by that?"

"It's your brother, isn't it?" I said.

Horikita was completely reserved about sharing her personal matters with others, but she decided to resolve herself this time. The class would be affected, after all.

"Your brother?" Ken tilted his head.

"Hey, Ken. Do you remember the glasses guy way back on the second day of school?"

"Glasses guy...? Ah, that serious-lookin' dude who stood on stage for a long time without sayin' anythin'? He sure made an impression. Even I hadn't forgotten that."

"Yeah. He was the student council president, remember? And as it turns out, he's also Horikita's older brother," I explained.

"I see... I knew he was the president, but I never thought he'd be

Horikita's brother."

"Yes... The student council president is indeed my brother. I think he's going to be an anchor. That's why I want the position."

"You want to be an anchor just like your brother? Do you want to race against him or something?"

"Well, something like that..."

Ken raised an eyebrow. No one would understand something so vague, so I decided to help Horikita explain.

"Some stuff happened, so Horikita and her brother aren't really on speaking terms. She probably wants this opportunity to patch things up with him."

I didn't lie, but I didn't tell him the truth either.

"What about Hirata and Onodera?"

"I found lots of opportunities to tell them during practice. I thought the same would happen with you, but you were always occupied. I'm sorry if it was delayed until the last minute."

"So that's why you were forced to ask for my time up front," said Ken.

Well, given the topic, I assume Horikita would want to talk about this with the other person in a candid yet conspicuous way. But Ken didn't have any opportunities to be alone with her.

"Hey, Kiyotaka. Are you close with Horikita's brother?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that. I just happen to know what's going in between them."

"Ahh, so that's why she said you were *"partially involved"*. I get it now." Ken turned to Horikita and nodded. "Alright, you can fix my position to wherever. It's not like anything would change as long as all five of us run our fastest."

"I'm thankful for your cooperation, Sudou-kun," Horikita responded with a slight bow.

"Is that all?" he asked. "I'm supposed to hang out with some of the guys today, you see."

"Actually, there's one more thing... Since Ayanokouji-kun is already here, I think this is a good time. However, I might end up giving you a lengthy explanation. Would that be alright?" asked Horikita.

"I'm fine. I don't really have any plans," I replied.

Ken took his phone and typed something. After putting it back in his pocket, he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

"I made time. What is it?"

Horikita nodded before speaking.

"On October 3rd, next Sunday, right before 5:00 PM, I will send you the list for the Recommended-Participant portion of our roster. The same goes for you, Ayanokouji-kun, as well the other students

competing in the Recommended-Participant events."

"Huh? I thought you're gonna keep us in the dark about this?"

"I changed my mind... Or at least, that's what I'll tell Hirata-kun and the other students. I never planned on completely keeping our line-ups a secret."

"In other words, you deliberately lied to most of our classmates?" asked Ken.

"Yes, I lied."

"I've got two things to ask you then. Why did you lie to Hirata and why did you tell me and Kiyotaka."

"All of it boils down to one answer..." Horikita's eyes turned sharp. "It's because I'm wary of a traitor. I lied to Hirata-kun because he wouldn't agree with me suspecting a classmate-- at least not right now where I don't have a solid basis. That's why I'm temporarily keeping him out of the loop. The opposite is true for the two of you. I don't mind telling you my true plan."

"So you're trusting *us*, huh?"

"But it's not like our innocence is guaranteed. What if one of us turned out to be the traitor," I asked.

"Then shame on me. I trusted the wrong people. I'll accept my loss right then and there." Horikita answered with a defeated expression.

"Hey, how can you say that so easily?" asked Ken.

"Let's say I become even more vigilant than I already am. Wouldn't that make me a leader who has zero trust in *all* of her allies? I might as well be fighting alone," Horikita smiled after giving Ken a gentle answer.

He froze up after seeing a completely different side of her. Unlike me, he wasn't privy to the gradual change in Horikita's mindset.

"Don't get me wrong. The reason why I'm keeping secrets right now is to make sure that I won't have to do so later. In the future, I want to lead Class A with each and every member of the class knowing my plan. However, I can't do that right now. I must assess whether or not someone could betray us."

"I get what you mean, Horikita. I really do. But it doesn't make sense. Why would any of our classmates betray us at this point? We're already in Class A. There would be no merit in doing so," replied Ken.

His concern wasn't without reason. It's hard to suspect your classmates let alone your friends. That goes double for us who were already at the top.

"We're in Class A right now, but I can't personally guarantee that we would stay in Class A. If a disaster happens and we get demoted, one of us might change sides. And that's already with the

assumption that there are no traitors in our class right now. Remember, changing classes is possible with the use of private points. If a mole is hiding inside our class, then we're in big trouble."

"That costs 20 million private points, right? We would probably notice if someone has that much money."

"It's almost impossible to hide, yes. But if they're getting backed by another class, then it's doable."

Ken was holding the side of his head in thought. However, it didn't even take a minute before he groaned in annoyance and gave up.

"Aaargh, whatever! There's too much information!" he grunted. "It doesn't seem like Kiyotaka is against you, so I'll be on your side. But remember this, Horikita. My friends-- Airi, Akito, and Haruka-- they'll never betray the class. So protect them, as well."

"I promise," she replied.

"I understand what you wanna do for the class, so you can ask for my help if you ever need me. I'll keep my mouth shut about it, too." Ken turned to me and asked. "What about you, Kiyotaka?"

"With all due respect, I'd prefer to be left out of this. I don't like the idea of having a traitor inside the class, but I don't feel like going on a witch hunt, either." I gave them my honest answer.

"That's fine. I already expected your stance on this, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Alright, alright! Now that I kinda understand your motive, let's go back to your actions themselves. Can you explain your plan for the participation table?"

"In terms of gaining points on the festival itself, focusing on the Recommended-Participant competitions would be the right move. But if we're not careful, neglecting our roster for the All-Participant competitions might be our undoing in case of a leak."

"Wait a minute... This is a bit more complicated than earlier, so I'm starting to get lost. Please explain it to me like I'm a dumbass."

"Because you're a dumbass?" I teased.

Schwoop

Whack

Ken threw a punch at me, but I caught his hand before it could connect.

"Don't hit any other person who tries to make fun of you, alright, Ken?"

"Shut up, Kiyotaka. You and Akito are the only guys who would dare make fun of me."

Well, if we're talking about friendly banters, then I guess he's right. Someone like Ryuen would surely dare to do so, after all.

"Sorry, Horikita. Please, go on."

The staid Horikita sighed.

"Let's create a hypothetical scenario, then. Let's say Class A and Class B had 10 students and we quantify their athletic abilities into the numbers 1 to 10."

"I'm the one with the label of 10, of course," said Ken.

"Sure, you are... Anyway, if they had a student for each level of athleticism, then under normal circumstances the match-ups would have an average of a 50-50 result, probability-wise."

"Ohh... Okay, I think I get it."

"But what if Class B gets a hold of Class A's participation table? Competitions like the 100-meter dash and 200-meter dash are doomed. In this scenario, they can manipulate their own order and win up to 9 out of 10 match-ups."

"Hmm... So they'll pit their lankiest student against me while barely beatin' everyone...? That does seem like a landslide victory for the enemy."

"Only if they have information on our roster. Of course, we'll never know the truth until the sports festival has started." Horikita narrowed her eyes. "But you wouldn't want to find out the hard way, would you?"

"Yeah, I get what you mean."

"Well, my example was just hypothetical in the end. The concept is the same, but it'll never be that simple. Since they won't have information on how athletic most of our classmates are, then they'd have to make a rough estimate for a lot of the match-ups. There's also the possibility of underdogs overperforming," she explained. "It's simple on the surface, but it can be quite complicated. The main reason why I kept everything as hidden as possible was to prevent this in the first place." (2)

"On the other hand, our class would win by a large margin if we get a hold of their participation table."

"That's where traitors come in. It would be possible if someone was willing to sell their class out. But of course, that strategy also comes with a risk. The traitor might turn out to be a double agent, for example."

If we tackle the sports festival normally, then the only way to win is to perform better than everyone. Trying to look for shortcuts would be troublesome and risky which is pretty ironic.

"Ughh... All this scheming is making my head hurt."

"I had to do the same thing back when I was the class leader..." I sighed.

"I appreciate the two of you more now," said Ken, who didn't really sound sincere.

"I believe that Class A can hold its own. That's why I wanted the match-ups to be random at worst. If we can defend ourselves from any underhanded tactics, then our victory will at least depend on our own class's abilities," said Horikita.

Ken groaned as he stretched his arms.

"I hear ya loud and clear, Horikita. But you don't have to worry. I'm sure everyone will do their best. I was asked by Hirata to look over some of our classmates, ya know? I was personally coachin' them how to improve, so of course, they'll do well!"

"Weren't they just afraid of you?" I joked.

"Want me to punch ya again? Not that I'd ever land a hit."

"It's still scary, so please stop."

"You've changed quite a bit, Sudou-kun," Horikita commented.

As expected, Ken was again caught off-guard by her attitude. In his eyes, this was far from the usual Horikita.

"Hah, what are you sayin' all of a sudden, Horikita? Wasn't it you who changed? You were so stuck-up back then. You didn't even want anythin' to do with us," he shrugged. "Now you're speaking like a team player. It feels strange-- in a good way, though!"

Horikita smiled lightly in response.

"I could say the same to you, though. You weren't the type to listen at all, but you were pretty calm and collected this whole time despite your occasional overreactions," she replied.

If I look back on the first semester, I could never imagine these two having such a conversation. We've come a long way, and they've both grown to be assets for the class. Of course, they still have a lot of things to improve on.

"Both of you had changed. I can say that as a third party. And I'm sure it's not just you guys." I joined their conversation with a comment of my own.

"Ah, shucks. Let's get the hell outta here before everything gets weird. Hirata should be on his way to Chabashira-sensei right about now," said Ken.

"I guess so," she replied.

"Heh. In the end, no one got to see what was on that paper. All that's left now is to beat everyone during the actual--"

"Hey, Horikita-chan, Sudou, Ayanokouji!"

The three of us suddenly heard someone call our names. When we turned to see who it was, Ike was running towards us at full speed.

"Ike? The hell are you shouting and running for?" asked Ken.

"Ike-kun, is everything okay?" Horikita was concerned. Ike looked like he was in panic and distress.

"Did something happen, Ike?" I asked.

He huffed and puffed in exhaustion before breathing out to speak.

"I looked for you guys everywhere. You gotta go back to the classroom. Now!" he said.

"Why?"

"It's Ryuen and his goons. They got Hirata cornered inside. They must be after the list!"

"What, Ryuen-?!" Ken reacted in surprise. He couldn't have seen this coming.

"Let's go," said Horikita whose face was grim.

Author's Notes:

1. Assuming the importance of their talk is one thing, but Suzune was more impressed by Ken's move following that assumption which was to bring Kiyotaka to the table.

2. The strategy that they talked about was the one used by Ryuen when Kikyou betrayed the class in the canon.

Let's discuss why Suzune was suddenly concerned with the possibility of a traitor.

Here are some stupid reasons that are wrong:

- Fanfic Author buffs Horikita
- Fanfic Author makes Horikita smarter than her canon counterpart

Actual reasons:

- She was aware of the previous Class A traitor's self-destructive actions and wary about the same thing happening in her class.
- Kikyou blatantly admitted that she would betray the class if it weren't for Kiyotaka. She needed to make preparations for that, too.
- Overall character development in general along with her learnings from observing Kiyotaka. Though she still has a long way to go, obviously. She'll be taking on Ryuen and Arisu on her own, after all.
- In the canon, she learned the possibility of a traitor's existence the hard way. And it's not about Alter Horikita being smarter or skillful. Canon Horikita was just much more ignorant.

Vol. 5: Chapter 9.3 - The Devil's Offer

After everything I've witnessed during Ayanokouji-kun's time as our class's leader, I finally realized just how inadequate I am in comparison. The clear-cut confidence I had for my every move had vanished, and I'm forced to double-take my decisions at every turn. Ayanokouji-kun was on guard against everyone, making calculated attacks while ensuring a solid defense. I must take after his methods.

This time wasn't an exception. Despite all my planning along with the help I've garnered from Hirata-kun and the others, I never actually believed that I was in control of our situation. That's why I was still prepared for the worst-case scenario if anything unexpected ever happened. Sure enough, our enemies wouldn't sit down without doing anything. Ryuuen-kun, our supposed ally, seems to have made his move.

Ryuuen-kun and now Sakayanagi-san... If they're on a level that I haven't reached yet, I can't be cautious enough about my own moves.

September 27th, 3:57 PM.

"Ah, Suzune. You're finally here."

The three of us arrived inside the classroom after being led by Ike-kun. The student named Yamada Albert was guarding outside while Ibuki-san and Ishizaki-kun were inside along with Ryuuen-kun himself. Hirata-kun was still holding the metal clasp envelope containing our participation table. Beside him were Yamauchi-kun, Hondou-kun, and Miyamoto-kun.

"We told you to get the outta here already," Hondou-kun angrily reprimanded the other group.

"Shut your trap, Hondou. You're the one who's not needed here. Why don't you and your other idiot friends get out?" Ishizaki-kun replied.

Yamauchi-kun was clenching his fists in rage, but he stayed quiet.

"The hell are you up to this time, Ryuuen?!" yelled Sudou-kun.

"Calm down, Ken. The classroom is being monitored by cameras. They won't do anything rash." Ayanokouji-kun's words calmed him and Ike-kun's group.

"Good job on calling them, Ike. Now that Suzune is here, we can

finally get down to business."

"What are you doing here, Ryuuken-kun?" I asked.

"Kukuku. You're getting the wrong idea. I don't really care about your participation table or list or whatever. I'm just here to talk."

"Quite the company for a simple talk."

"Heh, you don't have to mind them. For now, why don't we relax for a bit?"

Ryuuken-kun sat on top of the teacher's table and urged us to take our seats.

Hirata-kun and the others did the same. They're not letting their guards down. I can tell just by looking at their sharp-eyed expressions.

"So? What is this about?" As the leader, I broke the silence and started the discourse.

"Long story short, I want the two of us to team up," he smirked.

"Don't do it, Horikita-chan! There's no way you can trust this guy!" Yamauchi-kun instantly raised his voice in protest.

"That's right!" Ike-kun followed.

Ryuuken-kun didn't seem to mind their unruly interruption. He raised an eyebrow while waiting for my answer.

"Before I make a decision, I would like to hear what you have in mind first. Is that fine?"

"Of course, of course. Asking you to team up with me is suspicious enough already. I can't possibly convince any of you without a good rationale."

"Wait, Horikita-san. I would usually be the voice of reason for Haruki or Kanji, but I agree with them this time. I don't think working with Ryuuken is a good idea..." Hondou-kun said.

"Don't worry. I already know that much. But I do think it's a good idea to at least see if Ryuuken-kun has anything useful to say."

"Sure. I don't mind if you treat this as simple information gathering."

I briefly glanced at Ayanokouji-kun and Sudou-kun who continued to listen in silence.

"Alright, spill it. You were so adamant about not getting involved with us for the longest time. What suddenly changed your mind?"

"You see, a piece of juicy information reached me recently. Apparently, Sakayanagi has something planned this time."

"Sakayanagi-san is it...? From whom did you hear this so-called *"information"*?"

"I can't tell you their name, but a remnant of the Katsuragi Faction told me."

From Katsuragi-kun's faction...? I heard they got completely dissolved. Something about this makes me a bit skeptical. I need to

know if Ryuuen-kun is telling the truth.

"Don't do anything stupid, Suzune. I know what you're thinking. You want to consult Katsuragi to confirm whether I'm lying or not."

It seems like he expected that line of thinking.

"What's wrong with that?"

"It doesn't seem like you're aware of Class B's current state. That's pathetic considering you're the leader," he sneered. "Katsuragi's allies were all absorbed into Sakayanagi's new Class B. This was under Katsuragi's orders himself. I'm one thing, but Sakayanagi is her own type of ruthless. Katsuragi knew what would happen to the few people who wanted to continue following him if they don't conform to Sakayanagi's ruling."

"In other words, an opposition against Sakayanagi-san must be kept in secret at all cost."

"That's right. You can't just casually mention what I said to Katsuragi. Even he's unaware that someone from his past circle is moving against Sakayanagi. If that girl winds up sniffing my informant out, we'll lose our only key to beating her."

"Alright, I can understand that. Let's say that you're telling the truth. Did this informant tell you anything specific?"

"Nope. None of Katsuragi's former flunkies are that deep inside Class B's new top brass. And even if they did, you can't really expect me to tell you anything right now, can you? But of course, it's not like I can just wait around doing jack shit. That's why I came to you for cooperation."

"If I assume that everything you've told me thus far is true, how would you get me to trust you?"

"As I've said earlier, I don't really care about your participation table. Seeing it won't do me any good-- at least, not anymore."

"You've already submitted Class D's participation table?"

"Why do you think I brought these guys with me? I was expecting to get ambushed by Sakayanagi and his minions," Ryuuen-kun chuckled. "Of course, they didn't show up. Pretty boring if you ask me."

I have to take those words with a grain of salt, but if he's telling the truth, then I wouldn't have to worry about getting sabotaged by him, specifically. After all, once they've submitted their participation table, they will no longer be able to make any changes.

"If we team up, what kind of strategy do you have in mind?"

"That's for you to find out. I can't show you all of my cards while your other foot is still on the fence, can I?"

Hirata-kun and the others awaited my decision, but I needed to think about this.

"I don't know if you've realized this yet, but you have to take my offer Suzune. You don't have a choice," Contrary to his former attitude, Ryuuken-kun suddenly gave me a baleful smile.

"What would you do if I refuse?"

"It's simple. I'll team up with Sakayanagi instead," he threatened.

"That's strange. Why didn't you team up with Sakayanagi-san in the first place?"

"What do you mean by strange? Aren't you guys the obvious first choice? After all, you've got that bastard among you." Ryuuken-kun turned to Ayanokouji-kun who did nothing but observe. "I know he'd stepped down as your leader or whatever, but there's no way to be sure if he's not getting involved. If you refuse to team up with me, however, then I'd just have to fight you guys all over again."

I thought I could use Ayanokouji-kun's presence as a bluff, but it doesn't seem like Ryuuken-kun is afraid to go against him. I know for a fact that Ayanokouji-kun won't do anything to help us other than compete for the festival, so it would be bad if Class B and Class D started teaming up against us.

"So, Suzune? What do you say?" Ryuuken-kun leered at me, seemingly amused.

"I understand. Can you give me some time to think about this?"

"Ahh, you're so indecisive. That's no good, Suzune. But fine. We're running out of time, so you have to give me your answer tomorrow. I'll be sure to visit again," he said.

Without giving any of us the chance to reply, Ryuuken-kun left the classroom along with his classmates. There was a brief second of silence after the sliding door was closed, but it was immediately stunted by Yamauchi-kun's voice.

"Ahh, it's so annoying! I can't believe that guy just waltz in here like it's nothing!"

"I wanted to punch that damn Ishizaki," said Ike-kun.

"Calm down, you two. You can rant about your personal grudges later." Miyamoto-kun tried to placate his friends.

"Hirata, Horikita-san. What are you planning to do about this? You don't have to take the advice of an idiot like me, but personally, I can't trust Ryuuken." Hondou-kun addressed us regarding the situation.

"I agree. What he said kinda makes sense, but it's not like we're afraid. Even if they do team up, what are they even gonna do?" Sudou-kun followed.

"Just because we can't think of anything doesn't mean they can't. That type of complacency will be our undoing."

I put a bit of force behind my words which made them stop talking.

"I can understand the point of both sides, but there's still too much that we don't know. I think we should ask for everyone's opinion about this." Hirata-kun stood up and gave me the envelope. We were thinking of the same thing.

"We'll hold the submission for now," I said. "After I finish doing some investigation regarding this matter, we'll have a meeting to decide whether or not this is worth considering."

September 27th, 4:09 PM.

"Hirata-kun and I will stop by the faculty room. Chabashira-sensei should be waiting for us right now."

"I'm gonna go to Keyaki Mall to blow off some steam. Just remembering that Ryuen's face irritates me," Yamauchi-kun replied.

"We'll go with you, Haruki. It's not like we got anything planned," said Miyamoto-kun.

"Can I come with you guys on the way there? I was planning to buy some stuff before going home," Ayanokouji-kun asked.

"Sure thing, dude," replied Hondou-kun.

"This is a rare time, so just hang out with us while you're at it, Ayanokouji. We've got some things to ask you, too."

"I mean, I don't really have any other plans, so I've got no reason to decline."

"Sweet!" Ike-kun celebrated.

"It's prolly somethin' about the girls again, right, Ike?" Sudou-kun gave him a suspicious look.

"N-No! I mean, I guess that's part of it, but not all of it! It's nothing perverted, I promise! I'm a changed man!"

"I never said you were gonna ask anything perverted, though..."

"Ah-!"

"Well, whatever. I'm gonna go ahead now. Don't hold back on sluggin' these idiots if they do anythin' stupid, ya hear me, Kiyotaka?"

"Alright, sure, sure..."

September 27th, 4:14 PM.

"It would be nice if we can get Ayanokouji-kun's reassurance about this," said Hirata-kun.

"His stance is firm. He won't get involved in these matters from now on. I'm sure it's going to be tough, but we'll have to figure this out ourselves."

"That's true. We'll just have to show the other classes that we can rely on ourselves just fine."

After getting permission to enter, Hirata-kun and I were finally

face-to-face with Chabashira-sensei. She was currently the only one inside the room, so we won't have any reservations about telling her everything.

"What took you so long? Did anything happen?" she asked.

"Before that, is it alright if we move our submission to tomorrow?"

"That's fine. Are you planning to make any changes?"

"Depending on what we find out, then it's possible. You see..."

I explained what happened inside the classroom with Hirata-kun's help.

"I see... I'm sure you know that my help would be limited to answering simple questions. But it's fine since that's what you're after, correct?"

"Yes. We would like to know if Ryuen-kun is telling the truth about submitting Class D's participation table."

"Hmm, well, I was here when he looked for Sakagami-sensei earlier. I didn't really see anything, but I overheard their conversation a little bit."

What a stroke of luck.

"What did they say?"

"I'll tell you the things that I clearly heard."

And that she did.

September 27th, 3:33 PM.

"Is Sakagami-sensei in here?"

"Ryuen, are you here to submit your class's participation table?"

"Here ya go, Sensei. Feel free to check it out."

The sound of an envelope opening and a piece of paper rustling could be heard.

"Hmm, I see. This is indeed reasonable."

"Heh, right?"

"Alright, I'll see to it that your participation table is delivered safely."

"Kukuku. Thanks, Sensei. I'll be going ahead now."

"That was it?"

"Yes. It was a pretty cut-and-dried conversation," Chabashira-sensei shrugged as she leaned back in her chair.

"Hirata-kun, what do you think?" I asked.

"Well, nothing seemed irregular about it..."

"Hmm... If I were to submit Class A's participation table, then I'd rather keep the envelope closed, if possible," I said. "Are teachers required to check the contents of our participation table before it's submitted to the organizers?"

"It's optional, but not recommended."

"Why is that?"

"Teachers aren't allowed to give any advice unless the students themselves ask, and even that is pretty limited depending on what the students ask for. In a lot of situations, we can't help you out of our own volition due to the possibility of giving one class an unfair advantage."

"I see... But it would be allowed if I asked you to look through our class's participation table and give your opinion?"

"That is allowed, yes. Take what I heard from Sakagami-sensei, as an example. I would give you an objective and general opinion based on what I know about your class." Chabashira-sensei's authoritative tone reverberated throughout the room. "However, I can't help you if you ask me for a detailed methodology on how to beat a specific class, for instance."

"That example is a bit on the extreme end. I still think it's a bit tricky to identify where the line is drawn if we reach the grayer areas."

"We can just deal with it if we ever get there. I'll tell you whether I can or can't answer a question, and I'll tell you whether I can or can't cooperate if you ever need me to do something."

"I understand. Thank you, Sensei."

Hirata-kun and I exited the room feeling fairly satisfied.

"For now, we can assume that Class D has indeed submitted their participation table. The last matter would be whether or not Sakayanagi-san is really planning something. We must confirm that before moving forward."

"Do you have anything in mind, Horikita-san?"

"Yes," I replied. "I'll be sure to find out tomorrow."

Vol. 5: Chapter 10.1 - Time for an Answer

September 28th, 12:02 PM.

"Heya~, Horikita-san! I'm here!"

"I'm sorry for intruding."

"Thank you for coming, Ichinose-san, Kanzaki-kun. Sorry for the sudden notice."

"It's fine, it's fine. I get to have lunch with you, after all. I can't possibly pass this chance up," she said.

A lot of our classmates were staring curiously. It's understandable with Ichinose-san's popularity. All things considered, it must've been interesting to see someone like her eat lunch inside our classroom.

"I'm sorry if I can't find a more suitable location."

"To be honest, it's a nice refresher. Your classroom looks really clean."

"I'm sure your classroom looks just as nice, Ichinose-san." Hirata-kun, my co-leader, open his packed lunch beside me.

"Ehh, is that really the case? I haven't been to Class C's room that much so I didn't notice," Karuizawa followed up.

"You should come by and hang out sometimes, Karuizawa-san."

"For sure! I'm friends with some of the girls in your class. They're pretty energetic."

"Right? Aren't they adorable?"

With four tables clumped together, our group of five finally began eating lunch.

"I assume you wanted to talk about something of importance, Horikita-san." Kanzaki-kun started the discussion.

"Yes. It's regarding the sports festival."

"Ah, I thought so~!" said Ichinose-san. "Mm, these are great."

"I'm just curious. Does your class have any strategy in mind or anything of that sort?"

"Wait, Horikita. Before we respond to that question, why don't you give us your answer to it first?" said Kanzaki-kun.

"Of course. You see, our class doesn't have anything unique in mind. After considering the abilities of each and every one of my classmates, I've concluded that we'd still have a high chance of winning if we just tackled the sports festival head-on."

Ichinose-san gave Kanzaki-kun a smile. She seemed to have

expected my answer.

"I knew Horikita-san would be the same as us."

"With Shibata-kun and the others, it makes sense that Class C is confident," Hirata-kun said.

"But of course! My class can hold their own, you know?"

"Like, I've watched some of Yousuke-kun's practice games, and I guess Shibata-kun from your class is quite athletic."

"Not just him. We've got many students who had joined other sports clubs," Ichinose-san explained. "Well... Even if that was the case, I still honestly don't think we could brute-force our way to the top, though."

"Ehh, what do you mean?" Karuizawa-san tilted her head.

"Considering the type of competitions we'll have, the class with the most number of physically gifted students would most likely have the easiest time. That class belongs to Ryuen-kun. Class B and Class C would usually come next with Horikita-san's Class A coming in last, but unfortunately for us, anomalies also exist."

"Anomalies, huh? You're talking about Sudou-kun and Ayanokouji-kun, aren't you? Those two are just super athletic-- like, an absurd level of athletic." Karuizawa-san smirked before munching on some rolled eggs.

"You said it. Those two would probably win any competition they're in, so a lot of points are guaranteed for your class, especially for the Recommended-Participant events. I'm confident that our classes can still take you guys on, but it won't be that easy," Ichinose-san shrugged before munching on some of her own rolled eggs.

"Mmm, yummy~!" they said.

Hirata-kun smiled at this sight while the boys audibly gasped in awe. That's especially true for Ike-kun and his group.

"So our plans are basically the same. That's reassuring considering how prevalent underhanded tactics are, thanks to Ryuen-kun."

That's true, but he's also the only one who has used them so far.

I wouldn't really consider Ayanokouji-kun's methods as "*underhanded*". He may have threatened Kushida-san, but his blackmail material was her own stain, and his intention was to make her an ally. On the island, his strategy was pretty straightforward, and he used deception only to counter Ryuen-kun's own deceptive strategy. Meanwhile, his methods were entirely different on the cruise ship. He just won by default after solving the pattern before anyone else. He then used that power to manipulate the results.

Ayanokouji-kun never resorted to using foul methods to defeat anyone. That's just how surgical and flawless his plans were.

"Well, I don't see how Ryuuken-kun can do anything weird this time, though. Sakayanagi-san and I made sure that no one would see our participation tables before submitting, and we're also on guard about showing them to our class since they might get leaked."

"Wait, so you and Sakayanagi-san have already finished submitting your participation tables?" I asked.

"Yep, we did it last week. Sakayanagi-san actually finished earlier than me, but she said she wanted us to submit our tables together, so she waited until I finished Class C's participation table."

"How considerate of her," said Hirata-kun.

"Yep! She's really sweet, isn't she?"

"Is there a possibility that she's just tricking you by submitting an empty envelope?" I asked.

"Hmm, I don't think so. Mashima-sensei's table is a bit far from Hoshinomiya-sensei's table, but I saw him looking over the paper itself when I took a quick glance. So I don't think she submitted a dud envelope."

In that case, all three classes have already submitted their participation tables. There would be no room for changes even if a leak happens.

"What about you guys?" asked Kanzaki-kun.

"We're submitting ours today," I replied.

"In other words, we won't have to worry about Class A in that aspect. Ryuuken and Class D are the only ones we need to be wary of."

It seems like they're still unaware. I can use that information as leverage.

"Ichinose-san, there's a question that I would like to ask you. However, it might compromise your team. So depending on how you answer, I am willing to give you some useful information in exchange."

"Oh?" she smirked. "Alright, I'm down. Ask away, Horikita-san."

Ichinose-san didn't look surprised at all. I looked at Hirata-kun who nodded at me, looking a little tense. Karuizawa-san stopped making unnecessary noises, too, after noticing the sudden shift in the atmosphere.

"In terms of approach, we already know what each of our classes is planning. So apart from Ryuuken-kun, Sakayanagi-san and her Class B would be the only ones left. Since you guys are on the same team, I thought you'd know some things about them."

"Well, our classes are in a bit of a cooperative relationship, so I can't say that I totally know nothing."

"Then... does Sakayanagi-san have a plan of some sort?"

"This is the main reason why you wanted to have a talk, isn't it,

Horikita-san?" Ichinose-san deduced my intentions correctly, so doubling down would be the best move for me.

"Yes, that is right."

"As expected of you! Well, Sakayanagi-san is really mysterious, and facing the unknown is pretty scary. I can understand why you're particularly on guard against her," she shrugged before facing me with a serious expression. "But with that being said, she does have a plan, and she looked pretty confident about it."

"Ichinose... I don't think you should say any more," Kanzaki-kun interrupted her while fixing his bento box.

"It's fine, Kanzaki-kun. I don't plan on getting Sakayanagi-san's plan spoiled. And to tell you the truth, she never really said anything specific to me... But there's one thing that I think you guys should know." She leaned back, looking relaxed.

"W-Which is...?" asked the nervous Karuizawa-san.

"Sakayanagi-san is after you guys. Her *target* is Class A," Ichinose-san said.

"That's a bit scary... But, I mean, isn't that no-brainer, though? Like, isn't everyone after Class A? Right, Yousuke-kun?"

"Yes, I think you're right..." he replied. "But I don't think that's all there is to it."

"Exactly~! Good sense, Hirata-kun. Sakayanagi-san didn't seem to be going after Class A in a general sense. Of course, this is all speculation based on how I interpreted things, but it seemed pretty personal."

"Personal? Maybe she's coming for revenge?" Karuizawa-san wondered.

"Probably. That makes the most sense," shrugged Ichinose-san.

"I think so, too..." That's what I said, but it couldn't be further from the truth.

If Sakayanagi-san's intentions were exactly as Ichinose-san had framed, then it is indeed strange. If she's planning to seriously defeat us, then wouldn't it be better if she did so before we could overtake Class A? But if you think about it, there's no way she could've prevented our first two major victories due to her absence...

No matter how much I try to read between the lines, the only logical conclusion would be some sort of vengeance stemming from the former Class A's sense of rivalry and pride. But still, I just don't feel like that's the whole truth.

"Nothing about what Ichinose told you was false. We're expecting the same from you, Horikita."

That aside, it was finally time to fulfill my end of the bargain.

"Don't worry, Kanzaki-kun. Despite us being on different teams, I

still recognize our alliance. There's no reason for deception," I said.

"Alright then. What kind of information will you give us," he asked.

"You're worried about Ryuen-kun, right? Well, you can rest easy now. He'd already submitted Class D's participation table."

I told them what Chabashira-sensei had reported to me and Hirata-kun yesterday. It was also Karuizawa-san's first time hearing about it, so she got pretty excited.

"Wait, so all of the other classes have already submitted? That means there's no harm if we get to see our line-up for the school festival!"

Her celebration was heard by everyone inside the classroom. Some made a sigh of relief while some became enthusiastic.

"Ooh, great! My classmates were very excited to see our line-ups, too."

I would've told them about Ryuen-kun's offer regarding Class A and Class D's potential cooperation, but since I have no idea what Sakayanagi-san is planning, it might be too risky.

September 28th, 12:47 PM.

"Thank you for taking your time to have a discussion with us," I said.

"Oh no, don't mind it. In fact, I'm the one who wanted to thank you guys for inviting us to have lunch. It was very fun."

"See ya, Ichinose-san, Kanzaki-kun," Karuizawa-san waved at them.

She and Ichinose-san seemed to get along just fine. They became the noisiest pair after we finished the discussion. Meanwhile, Hirata-kun and I had a different type of conversation with Kanzaki-kun. We talked about some bits of our practice methods and other things related to it.

"I'll go hang out it with Kayokocchi and the others. See ya later, Yousuke-kun, Horikita-san, too."

Hirata-kun saw her off with a smile, but that immediately faded as soon as he faced me.

"Everything we've discussed with Ichinose-san confirms Ryuen-kun's claims. I think we can ask for the class's opinion now."

"Yes, I agree. We'll have a meeting after class."

September 28th, 3:32 PM.

"We won't have practice today, but before everyone goes, there's something we'd like to discuss with the class," said Hirata-kun.

I started to report our findings to the class, and Hirata-kun wrote every key point on the blackboard. The class listened intently, apart

from Kouenji-kun who left without notice.

- *Class B has a plan, info by Ryuuen Kakeru and confirmed by Ichinose Honami.*

- *Class D wanted cooperation.*

- *Class D threatened to team up with Class B if we refused.*

- *Class D had submitted their participation table, confirmed by Chabashira-sensei.*

- *Class B and Class C had submitted their participation table, confirmed by Ichinose Honami.*

"With these in mind, I would like your opinion of whether we should cooperate with Class D."

Hondou-kun raised his hand before anyone else. He's been really active in class lately, helping out in every way he can during practice and giving out his opinions during meetings. The class has a steadily improving impression of him along with Minami Setsuyakun. It's unfortunate that the two of them aren't as active during lessons, though.

"First of all, what do you think is the best course of action for us, Horikita-san? As our leader, I think it's fine if you try to influence us with our decision."

Everyone nodded after hearing his question.

"Personally, I don't mind giving Ryuuen-kun a chance. If I'm being honest, I don't have the faintest idea as to what Sakayanagi-san's plan could be. Ryuuen-kun might have an answer, but he's only going to give me more information if I teamed up with him. And of course, we'd know what would happen if we refuse his offer."

Well, it was more like a demand, at this point."

"Horikita-san... I can't seem to put my head around it," said Matsushita-san. "What would Sakayanagi-san and Class B even do? How exactly would they take us down?"

"I agree... The most dangerous part about this would be the preparation phase where our participation table could be leaked, but that's not the case anymore," Nishimura-san followed.

Hirata-kun had the same opinion as them. These three are among the smartest and most critical students of Class A. If even they can't grasp Sakayanagi-san's plan, then we're in big trouble.

"What if Sakayanagi is bluffing?" asked Kikuchi-kun.

"Certainly... I mean, it's a possibility considering how open our alliance with Class C is. Sakayanagi-san might've predicted that you'd ask them about this very topic. Don't you think it's a fine strategy to throw us off?" Ijuuin-kun explained.

"Yes, that may be the case... But what would that accomplish? Even if they throw us off now by making us paranoid, it's not like

our performance will decline on the actual day of the festival where there's no room for tricks."

"The only viable option would be to beat us by injuring our participants," said Sudou-kun.

A lot of our less athletic students shrunk in fear. The thought of violence being used against them must've been unnerving.

"That's true, but they would also run the risk of getting caught. It's a method that fits someone like Ryuen. But then again, it's not like we know how Sakayanagi-san thinks, so it's still a possibility," Miyake-kun followed.

We all started to think in silence. A bunch of murmurs could be heard, but all of them were filled with words of wonder and confusion.

"There's another thing that I'm wondering about. If our class refuses and Class D teams up with Class B, what would change? At the end of the day, all four classes will still be against each other in terms of fighting for placements. The only thing that we'd have in common is our team color. There are two-team events like the Tug of War and the Cavalry Battle where two classes are forced to work together, so Ryuen-kun and his class might deliberately throw those events for Class B's benefit. But if they do that, they would also be shooting themselves in the foot," Matsushita-san explained.

"That's a valid point. They can't afford to do that when they're already at the bottom of the class rankings," I replied.

"Say, Horikita-san. What did that Ryuen guy even demand from our class if you end up saying yes?" asked Karuizawa-san. That was another vital point.

"Now that you've mentioned it, he didn't really demand anything specific. He just wanted my cooperation."

Just as we reached the closing parts of our meeting, the door suddenly opened without any warning.

"Kukuku, so that's why I can vaguely hear a lot of different voices outside. Everyone's around, huh? Well, everyone except that Kouenji."

Ryuen-kun entered the classroom just as he said he would. But this time, he came alone.

"You're earlier than expected. We were just discussing your proposal from yesterday," I said.

Fortunately, Hirata-kun managed to erase the last line that he wrote before Ryuen-kun could properly read what was on the board. We didn't want him to freely gain that information if he was still unaware of it. He then transitioned into gently erasing everything else to give Ryuen-kun the impression that we weren't trying to hide anything.

"Is that so? Well then, I suppose you guys have an answer now?"

This was the pivotal moment that might make or break our chances to retaliate against whatever Sakayanagi-san is planning.

We need to decide now, huh? It's not like Ryuen-kun's deadline is absolute, but we'd rather use our right to choose.

Everyone held their breaths as I opened my mouth to answer.

"Sorry, Ryuen-kun, but I think we'll be fine on our own. It'll be rough if you team up with Sakayanagi-san and Class B, but I refuse to cooperate with you right now."

"Ohh? Is that your final answer, Suzune?"

"Yes."

Ryuen-kun didn't look fazed at all. This made my classmates more nervous. He came here alone without any fear. One person managed to unsettle our class just by exuding his dominant presence. Adding the fact that we didn't know whether he had Yamada-kun or Ishizaki-kun waiting outside, it made sense for most of us to feel afraid.

Guys like Ayanokouji-kun or Miyake-kun weren't afraid of him, but they just sat quietly without saying anything. The same goes for Sudou-kun who I've been watching out for this whole time. After all, it would've been bad if a fight broke off.

"That's a shame, though I guess it can't be helped. But don't you worry, I'm still very much looking forward to the sports festival." His sinister grin was there for everyone to see.

Ryuen-kun comfortably walked out of our classroom with his hands inside his pockets. He came to get his answer and then left without any commotion. That was it.

Vol. 5: Chapter 10.1.2 - The Observer's Verdict

After Ryuuen left, the tension seemed to have finally faded.

"I wonder if I made the right decision," said Horikita.

The class didn't come to an agreement before Ryuuen came in, and all of our classmates stayed silent when he questioned her. Horikita had to make a decision on her own, so it's understandable for her to feel doubtful.

"I honestly have no idea what the right decision was, so I don't think you should dwell on it too much, Horikita-san," Hirata replied as he cleaned up the board and put everything in place.

"I personally think Horikita-san made the right decision. Like, there's no way I'd team up with the guy who tries to get others suspended or expelled for no reason." Karuizawa made a callback to what Ryuuen tried to pull against Ken, Ike, and Yamauchi.

Most of our classmates nodded at her words. Unlike Kouenji, Ryuuen wasn't as simple as a double-edged sword. Try using him, and you won't even feel any pain until you notice yourself holding the razor-sharp hilt.

"Well, why don't we raise our hands to vote? I'll ask whether or not you think it's a good idea to team up with Ryuuen-kun," Kikyou suggested with a smile.

The class cooperated without much issue. In the end, more than half were in favor of Horikita's decision. There were some who refused to vote, claiming to be part of the "*I don't know*" club. But all in all, it seems like no thought that teaming up with Ryuuen was the right move to make. And even if someone did, going against the class now would only raise eyebrows.

"As you can see, you've essentially given Class A's reply to Ryuuen-kun," Kikyou reassured Horikita.

"It'll be fine, Horikita. We've been working hard this whole time. Our class will win this for sure," said Ken.

"We'll take them head-on!" yelled Ike.

"Yeah, I'll pay Ryuuen back this time!" followed Yamauchi.

The Class A students cheered behind them. It's good to see their enthusiasm, but we'd have to face reality soon enough. It's not just us-- every class was doing their best to prepare. And in terms of

overall physical ability, Class A definitely places behind the others if it wasn't for Ken. If we look at it just based on pure data, the battle of the first-years will be very close.

Well, that *would* be the case as long as I take myself out of the picture.

"I see... Then I guess all we have to do is prepare as much as we can. On the day of the sports festival, we'll have nothing but ourselves to rely on." Horikita slightly bowed. "Please do your best, everyone."

"Of course, Horikita-san!"

"You got it!"

In terms of morale, however, our class was definitely among the top. Everyone felt positive despite Ryuen's foreboding threat.

It was only natural.

We were Class A.

We've experienced nothing but victory.

As long as we work together and do our best, things will surely go our way.

Unfortunately, it's about time they all woke up from this very long dream.

Vol. 5: Chapter 11.1 - The Curtains Rise

The class started pouring their hearts out during the remaining practice week. The most unathletic ones for the guys would be Professor, Ijuuin, Ueno, and Yukimura who had to double their effort just to keep up with everyone. The same could be said for Airi, Ishikura, Rino, and Inogashira for the girls. However, their hard work won't go unrecognized. Everyone would cheer them up whenever they can, and seeing even the least competent ones in our class try their hardest inspired the rest.

Well, Ueno looked like he didn't want anything to do with this, though. Even then, seeing him finish his quota every time during practice encouraged the entire class since all of us knew how much he hated physical activities. (1)

"I... I'm gonna puke..." he said.

"Oi, oi, Itsuki! Hold it in for now, man! Let's get you to the water station," Onizuka accompanied him with a panicked look.

"I'm beat!"

Meanwhile, Yamauchi, Ike, Hondou, and Miyamoto were lying on the ground, huffing and puffing along with Professor and Ijuuin who looked like they were unable to move any further. They were all working hard, just like everyone else.

"I finally surpassed... my record... I'll definitely sprint past those... Class D bastards in the running competitions," said Yamauchi.

"Say... Say that when you... beat me first," said Hondou.

They were all panting heavily.

"Airi! Good job!" yelled Haruka.

"Ohh, that's a record. Nice going, Airi," followed Akito.

"Yeah. You're doing great," I said.

"T-Thank... goodness... Haahh..." Airi crouched down while gasping for air.

Since Ken was busy coaching others, he didn't have much time to hang out with us. Well, it looked like he was having fun, at the very least. I initially thought it wouldn't end well because of Ken's short temper, but Horikita did a great job in assigning the right guys to him. If Ken coached slow and frail students, then he might lash out at them. Fortunately, his training partners were Makida and Minami (Setsuya) who were fairly athletic alongside Akito. He helps with coaching the likes of Ike or Yamauchi sometimes, and as expected,

he does scold them, but Hirata would always diffuse the situation before it can get out of hand.

Later on, I did some running and stopped near Hirata.

"Good work today, Ayanokouji-kun," he greeted.

"Good work. You're still collecting data?" I asked.

"Well, yes. It's unnecessary since we've already submitted our Participation Table, but I think it's a good practice in general."

"I guess so," I looked toward Horikita who was practicing with Matsushita and Onodera. "By the way, how did the recent negotiations go?"

There were two notable events that were addressed by our leader duo. I wasn't really involved, but I asked about their outcomes out of curiosity.

"Ahh, the issue with Ibuki-san and Horikita-san's competition was set before we submitted the table a few days ago. They should be able to compete against each other in one of the events. And for the matter with Ichinose-san and Class C, Horikita-san declined because she didn't want to give them any intel."

Apparently, Ichinose asked Horikita if our classes could practice together. She even went so far as to propose a mock battle with our actual line-ups just to test things out. She argued that there would be no risk since they can't change their order, anyway. And the same goes for the other two classes.

Horikita agreed with her on paper, but she didn't want to show any openings before the event so she turned her down.

"Ichinose is pretty confident. She didn't mind showing her cards if it meant seeing ours in return."

"Yes. As a response, Horikita-san wanted to be solid. After she distributed a softcopy of the participation table to the class, she still asked everyone to keep the information exclusive to Class A."

"She sent the file to our class group chat back then, right? I haven't downloaded it yet, though."

"You're not interested in your order of participation?" he asked.

"I am, but I don't mind waiting until the weekend. That said, it doesn't seem like Horikita is completely convinced that we're safe."

"Class B and Class D should've submitted their participation table already, but there is no absolute guarantee unless we've seen them do it in real-time. That's what Horikita-san told me. To be honest, I have to agree with her. There's no telling what someone like Sakayanagi-san would do."

Chabashira-sensei wouldn't lie to them so Horikita was confident that Ryuuen was in the safe, but that wasn't the case for Ichinose, who was on the other team. Even if our classes were allies, they wouldn't give her their unwavering trust. Horikita and Hirata

refused to take any chances.

"We've all practiced more than what's probably required. After we make sure that no one gets sick or injured before the event, all that's left to do would be to compete and win," said Hirata.

"Yeah, this will be our first major battle as Class A. The class will finally get the chance to prove their worth."

Hirata was worried, but he was also looking forward to seeing the fruits of our classmates' labor. It won't be easy, but we have no choice but to face it. As someone who has looked after the class for the longest time, Hirata knows that more than anyone else. At first glance, he seemed like an optimist, but his positivity stems from realism. He'll gladly harbor all the worry if it meant lessening the anxiety for everyone else.

The 4th of October came and the curtains for the sports festival has finally risen.

The entire student body marched along the gigantic sports field. We were all wearing our standard PE getup, much like the ones we wore during class and practice. The march itself wasn't really uniform, but it was still orderly.

Only a few spectators could be seen from the school ground's outskirts and the bleachers' area. Because of the rules regarding outsiders, the audience were probably adults who work inside the school. It didn't seem like there were any strict regulations against them, so they could freely watch the festival. A number of students might be familiar with a few of the spectators given how some of them would occasionally smile or wave.

On the other hand, the teachers were as stone-faced as ever. And seeing a lot of medical personnel on standby inside a cottage-like facility once again shows how meticulous the school was in terms of preparation. Each team had tents set up on the opposite sides of the track, ready for any situation.

"Alright, we're finally here!" said Yamauchi.

"It's time to show off to the girls!" followed Ike.

"Kikyou-chan won't look at the likes of you," teased Hondou.

"Right back at you, Ryoutarou!"

"Stop arguing, will ya?" Miyamoto scolded.

"Ohoho, how mature of you, Soshi-dono," Professor commented.

"Haruki, Kanji, take a page from Soshi's behavior."

"Hey, Ryoutarou, why did you lump me with Kanji?! I wasn't even arguing with you guys!"

"And you're getting scolded too, aren't you, Ryoutarou?!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Teehee," Hondou replied, playing dumb.

"Now, now... We should at least try to get a perfect score when it comes to discipline," added Ijuuin.

"Hmph, Wataru's right," Miyamoto snorted. "You guys won't get to show off when I'm here!"

"Ah, I take back what I said about you, Soshi..." Hondou sighed.

It didn't seem like their group was getting hit by nerves which was a good sign. Of course, it couldn't be helped that some of us were nervous, but their resolve could still be seen clearly.

Fujimaki from Class 3-A gave a speech during the opening ceremony which was expected given how the group meet-ups went last time, but it was still weird not seeing the student council president on the forefront.

"Are you ready, Ayanokouji-kun?" Horikita asked from behind.

"I reviewed the participation table last night. I'll be wherever I need to be," I replied.

"I see..." Horikita took a deep breath before facing forward. The class looked at her with confident smiles. "Well, then. Class 1-A has done everything it can. Let's do our best out there."

"This will be in the bag, Horikita!"

"Class A for the win!"

"I've practiced real hard for this that I almost got sick!"

"Hey, don't joke about that!"

The class was in high spirits and their focus was on the sports festival. That's why they didn't notice the gaze of a certain girl who was sitting inside one of the White Team's tents. I can see her grinning-- celebrating the smiles of those who will soon be thoroughly crushed by her.

Author's Notes:

*1. Think of Ueno Itsuki as their class's Tanaka from "**Tanaka-kun wa Itsumo Kedaruge**".*

Here's a reference for the class's current athletic abilities in the form of an OAA score.

These scores are canon for the characters with established profiles. Two exceptions are Kiyotaka (91) and Chiaki (54) reason being that they were not holding back (although Kiyotaka is still obviously not giving it his all). Everything else is non-canon and may be changed in the future if Kinu-sensei puts anything out.

The other exception was Mii-chan who was seen as unathletic in Volume 8. However, her Physical OAA rating got better in Year 2 (51).

Vol. 5: Chapter 12.1 - Presentiment

"Let's do this, you bastards!" Ken yelled.

The first event was the 100-meter dash. This type of event was ordered by grade level, starting with the first-year boys and ending with the third-year girls. After an event is finished, students will be given a short break. The order would be reversed for the next event, starting from the third-year girls to the first-year boys.

The competition was about to start and almost all of us got ready. Due to the pace at which the 100-meter dash will be handled, we should be waiting behind the first competitors on standby. A camera was also set up to watch the finish line. Victory and defeat could come down to a mere millimeter difference, after all. And of course, everyone was excited to be featured on the big screen containing different live feeds from the camera drones.

There were 80 boys in the first-year category. 10 groups with 8 members were formed with 2 students from each class.

Horikita was responsible for how everyone was ordered from a tactical standpoint. And since I wasn't involved during their brainstorming, I didn't really get the philosophy behind the way we were grouped. She only shared some of it with me after explaining why she put me in a certain group. To be honest, I'm just grateful that she considered my feelings.

To avoid attention, I wasn't put in the first group. And having our best athlete, Ken, in the first group was also predictable so he wasn't there. But at the same time, we also wanted to start strong. To do that, *they* would be our best choice.

"You can do it, Hirata-kun, Minami-kun!"

Some of the girls cheered for our first duo; Hirata Yousuke and Minami Setsuya. Everyone watched with bated breaths. This was our chance to build some early momentum. Any sort of hype will help the rest of our class get in gear.

As for their opponents... Hashimoto Masayoshi from Class B and Sonoda Masashi from Class D... According to the data we've collected from watching their respective classes practice, these two were among the most athletic guys, especially in terms of speed. What an unlucky match-up for our openers.

Hirata looked back at me with a smile.

"It seems like the other classes wanted a strong start, too. But this

was also within the range of our expectations," Hirata tapped my shoulder-- he probably guessed what I was thinking. "I'm in top condition today, Ayanokouji-kun. Leave it to me."

He was one of our aces. There's no way Hirata would back down without a fight.

That said, it wasn't just Hashimoto and Sonoda. Their partners were also solid. It wasn't clear if Minami could get even get fourth place.

"Sup, Yousuke!" Sonoda smilingly greeted his fellow Soccer Club member.

"Hey there, Masashi-kun." Hirata responded with a simple wave.

"Kinda sucks that we're up against each other, huh? I wanted to get a clean victory," said Hashimoto.

"Haha, you're right, Hashimoto-kun. This could be anyone's win."

A hint of seriousness could be seen behind Hirata's gentle eyes.

The runners got into position, and as soon as the signal sounded, all of them shot off at incredible speeds. As expected, Hirata, Hashimoto, and Sonoda were in the lead. However, a winner was decided within seconds.

"Wha-? Who the heck won?"

"Yeah... Hirata-kun and Hashimoto-kun finished at the same time..."

The organizers started checking the footage. After a few moments of deliberation.

"First place goes to Hirata Yousuke of Class A."

Our class erupted in joy.

"Let's go!"

"Way to go, Hirata-kun!"

Horikita made a sigh of relief. It was too close of a match for such a decisive round.

"Ahh, that was insane, Hirata. I know you're in the Soccer Club, but that was still something else," commented Hashimoto.

"It was a close fight. Hashimoto-kun is a member of the Tennis Club, right? You're also extremely athletic," Hirata turned to Sonoda who was laughing slightly.

"You're as fast as always, Yousuke. I would've had to settle for fourth place if Sou was here," he said.

Minami was also talking with the other Class A guys. Unfortunately, he got passed by Yonezu Haruto from Class C. It was also a close one between the two of them.

While they were talking, the second group was already preparing to run. Each race had a 20-second interval, so the entire 100-meter dash event would take about half an hour to completely finish.

"It's unfortunate that Minami-kun was matched up with many

other students who were more athletic or similarly athletic," said Horikita.

Minami's physical abilities were certainly above average. He was in the same range as Akito or Makida who are expected to place in the top four for their respective groups. Placing fifth wasn't a good result for him, but his match-ups were bad, so it couldn't be helped.

"Ken's up next with Makida," I muttered.

This time, there were two athletic powerhouses hailing Class B going up against them. Namely; Takemoto Shigeru and Matoba Shinji. Class C also had Tokitou Katsumi who was fairly athletic. Ken should be able to beat them all, but Makida would be hard-pressed to place fourth.

When the signal sounded, Ken shot forward like a bullet and took the lead. He easily got first place. There were five runners who finished behind Ken and they were extremely close to each other. But among the three students who were recorded to place after him, none of them were from Class A. In other words, Makida didn't make the top four.

"Let's go, Sudou! You zoomed past them!" celebrated Ike.

"That definitely felt faster than your practice runs!" added Yamauchi.

"Look at all those spectators in awe, Kencchin! They were caught off-guard by your speed!" yelled Haruka.

"Great job, Ken-kun." Airi clapped her hands happily.

"I'll take that MVP title, for sure!" Ken gave them a smile and a thumbs-up.

"That's alright, Sumu-chan. It was a close fight!" Onizuka comforted Makida.

"That may be the case... but it's so frustrating. It was so close. I could've gotten a fourth place," he said.

"Yeah... Apart from Sudou and the last two placers, everyone else was practically on the same level," said Okitani.

The same scenario happened. One of our runners might've gotten first place, but since our other runner got fifth place, we could only receive a total of 14 points. **(1)**

For the third group, our runners would be Professor and Ijuuin. As the most unathletic boys in the class, everyone expected this to be a giveaway round for Class A.

And as we've predicted, the two of them lost terribly. But on the bright side, one of them would at least get seventh place instead of both of them getting an eighth place if they were in different groups.

"I'm up next..."

Kikuchi and I were part of the fourth group. The two of us stood

inside our designated lanes and got in position.

"This is pretty unlucky... I could probably run faster than two or three of these guys, but the rest of them, I'm not confident." Kikuchi clapped twice while facing me. "Thank you in advance for placing first, Ayanokouji-sama."

"Stop praying like I'm some sort of god..."

"Ehehe. C'mon, isn't it fine? This will be an easy win for you."

Kikuchi sounded like he was fooling around, but his intuition was on point. There wasn't anyone in this group that I'm particularly aware of, so I should take first place pretty easily. But to me, this could be considered an unlucky match-up. I'll get so much attention if I win by a landslide and I want to avoid such an outcome at all costs.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you can do this!"

"Do your best, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"I'll kick your ass if you get last place, Tsuki!"

The girls who were cheering on me smiled bitterly after hearing Mori's, err, *supportive words* for Kikuchi.

When the signal sounded, I dashed forward to gain an initial lead. However, I didn't follow it up with a fast sprint due to how slow my opponents were. I adjusted my pace to secure the lead, but the distance between me and the others shouldn't have changed until the very end. I didn't run as fast as Ken or Hirata, but I wasn't slow either. I won first place without much trouble, but unfortunately, Kikuchi couldn't make the top-four finish.

"Ahh, my bad! I really tried to snag that fourth place, but the person in front of me wouldn't slow down..."

"It's fine, Tsuki. Ayanokouji got first, anyway," said Minami (Hakuo).

"And you looked like you were dying out there. Placing fifth was already a miracle, right Ayanokouji?" Makida turned to me.

"Yeah. Considering how athletic our opponents were, you've easily surpassed your performance from practice." I gave them my honest evaluation.

Next up was the fifth group which was also bound to give us trouble. Our runners were Yukimura, who wasn't expected to place high, and Kouenji, who was nowhere to be seen.

"Where the hell is that bastard?!" yelled Ken.

"Don't bother, Sudou-kun. It doesn't matter at this point," said Horikita.

"Are you really just going to let him do what he wants? Can't you at least try to convince him? You're our leader, right?" Ken was displeased about Horikita's decision, but Hirata was the one who stood in front of him.

"Sudou-kun, who do you think had spent the most time convincing Kouenji-kun to participate?" he asked.

"Hah? I dunno. You?"

"No. It's Horikita-san. She's been trying to get Kouenji-kun to cooperate with us for a very long time now. If she can't persuade him even after all her efforts, then anything else would be futile."

"Ah, is that so? Sorry, Horikita. I take back what I said earlier." Ken apologized, but his anger didn't seem to fade. "If that's the case, then I'll drag that bastard's ass here by force."

"Stop it, Sudou-kun," Horikita said.

"Please, Sudou-kun!" Kikyou cried out to him, as well.

"Don't even bother. I'll knock some sense into him right now."

Ken instantly spotted Kouenji who stood out like a sore thumb inside one of the tents. He began walking towards him as our classmates panicked.

"Ken-kun, please stop it!" Airi ran in front of him, opening her arms as if to block his way.

"Airi..."

Seeing her naturally softened his rage. He could see her legs trembling, but her eyes were dead-set on stopping him.

"Kencchin, none of what you want to do will benefit the class. In fact, you'll be doing the opposite."

"But that--"

"Get off your own ass, Ken. You're just being arrogant if you think Kouenji will listen to you, even if you try to use force," Akito joined in. "Just do what you're supposed to do, and that's to win. You're the one who's going to be the MVP, right?"

As usual, Akito didn't care about using harsh words against him. But Ken wasn't dumb. He understands that Akito was telling the truth. His friends just wanted him to stop-- for the sake of the class, and for his sake.

I tapped Ken's shoulder and signaled him to go back. Everyone can see his anger leaking away.

"Aaagh! Fine! If Kouenji is going to drag the class down, then I'll drag it up instead!"

Even Hirata and Kikyou wouldn't be able to stop Ken when he gets like this, but with the combined efforts of his closest friends, we managed to prevent any potential conflict.

"Horikita-san, this is bad!" yelled Ryuuko.

"What's going on, Nishimura-san?"

While our attention was on the commotion that Ken made, the sports festival kept going on. And to put things lightly, it wasn't going well for our class.

"Yukimura-kun placed seventh for group five and Kouenji-kun

was automatically put in eighth place for his absence. We've already expected that... But the same thing happened for groups six and seven. Our runners were the bottom two. And for group eight, while we expected Ueno-kun to place last, Sugawara-kun didn't even manage to place in the top four. He only finished in sixth place," Ryuuko explained.

"What...?! What the hell are they doing?!" shouted Ken.

"Eek-!"

Ike and Yamauchi panicked after getting glared at by him.

"Please calm down, Sudou-kun. It's not their fault. They were all clearly trying their best... It's just that-"

"It's the match-ups... They were all... *extremely unlucky*." Horikita had a grim expression while looking at the ninth group race.

"It's Hondou and Miyamoto. They're not bad, but they're not great either," commented Onizuka.

"Ahh, this is a lost cause. Sumida and that guy Class B guy are too fast!" cried Ike.

"Wait, Kanji! Those two are fast, but the rest of them are slowpokes! Ryoutarou and Soshi can still do it!" said Yamauchi.

The whole class started cheering them on, and after a few seconds, Hondou and Miyamoto finished in third and fourth place. Everyone celebrated, but it didn't take long. The last group's signal was sounded and our last pair were Miyake Akito and Minami Hakuo. Akito was pretty athletic, but Minami hovered along the average line.

"What the hell? Their last pairs also look pretty stacked!" said the panting Hondou.

Akito was among those who were fighting for first place. After they reached the finished line, the organizers checked the footage to confirm the placing on what looked like a three-way tie.

Meanwhile, the other runners finally finished the race. And to the class's shock, Minami... placed last.

"Are you serious...?" Miyamoto couldn't believe his eyes. "Minami was just about as fast as me if not a bit faster... and he still placed last...?"

"The guys he was racing with... They were also pretty close to his speed. They were just a tiny bit faster than him..." said Hondou.

"Whaaat?! Man, this is so freakin' unlucky!" whined Ike.

While we were lamenting that tragic outcome, the footage was finally done getting reviewed.

"Beppu Ryouta from Class C places first. Komiya Kyougo from Class D places second. And Miyake Akito from Class A places third."

The other two classes celebrated while our class moaned in disappointment. Akito jogged toward us with an apologetic

expression.

"My bad. I couldn't win," he said.

"We weren't groaning because of your performance, Miyake. That was close as hell! You weren't given justice!"

"Yeah, you should've gotten first!"

"I think it's still amazing that Miyake-kun got third..."

"Don't mind, Miyacchi!"

"D-Don't mind, Akito-kun."

"I'm the one who's sorry. I placed last!" said Minami.

"Nothing you could've done about that, Haku!" replied Onizuka.

"Your race was also close. You were just really unlucky. Don't mind, don't mind!" followed Kikuchi.

With that, the first-year male category had finally finished.

"Good luck out there," I said.

"I'll do my best," replied Horikita.

The other girls started preparing, too. However, before they could start running, our current scores were tallied and displayed for everyone to see. The class looked at the screen with different reactions. Some turned away, while some stared absent-mindedly. However, everyone gritted their teeth in frustration.

The result was nothing short of a disaster.

"I knew it was bad... but I didn't know it was *this* bad..." said Yamauchi.

Class B took the lead with Class C following right behind them. Class D put up a fight and placed third. On the other hand...

Class A... was completely crushed.

Red Team: 107 points

- Class 1-A: 32 points

- Class 1-D: 75 points

White Team: 244 points

- Class 1-B: 129 points

- Class 1-C: 115 points

Author's Notes:

1. This is the Point System mentioned in the first chapter of Volume 5.

1st place: 15 points

2nd place: 12 points

3rd place: 10 points

4th place: 8 points

5th place: -1 points

6th place: -2 points

7th place: -3 points

8th place: -4 points

Regarding the order of participants, the changes were made with a lot of liberty. In the canon, Hirata was the one with the biggest influence on their class's canon participation table. This time, however, he was co-led by Horikita who had a bigger say in the matter.

Note that both of them were explicitly said to rely on hard data, but that only applies to who the competitors for the Recommended-Participant events will be. The order for the All-Participant events will be based on the leader's strategy.

The canon Class D's participation table and the Alter Class A's participation table were made with different mindsets, hence the changes in the order for the All-Participant category. Meanwhile, the lineup for the Recommended-Participant events would've been completely identical with the only difference being Kiyotaka's presence in most of it. Y'know, because he'd shown some of his abilities to the class.

To be honest, my initial idea was to stick to the canon details including everyone's order of participation, but I really felt like it would feel extremely unrealistic and forced considering how much the timeline has diverged. And it kinda works if I extend this reasoning to the other classes. I can use these changes to better fit the plot.

Vol. 5: Chapter 12.2 - Avowal

As we got out of the track, the boys took their seats and focused without making any noise. Their eyes were serious. They planned on watching the girls run with an insane amount of concentration.

"The runners are getting more attention than what your exam papers will ever receive," I said.

"Oh shut it, Ayanokouji. Just sit down and watch with us. It'll be great!"

"We couldn't watch properly during practice, but none of the girls are here to police us right now!"

"A rare chance, I tell you! Rare!"

"Yeah, dude. It's about time we witness some *amazing* physics."

This group was led by Ike and Yamauchi, to no one's surprise. They said something about this being a once-in-a-school-year opportunity. Most of the guys were trying to play it cool, but they were also paying close attention.

Ken cracked his knuckles and warned everyone.

"If I ever see any of you ogling Airi or Haruka, I won't show any mercy. I'll gouge the eyes of any pervert."

Everyone trembled in fear. However, the shameless Yamauchi asked a shameless question.

"As long as it's not Sakura or Hasebe, then it's fine, right?" he asked.

"Whatever, dude." Ken narrowed his eyes and turned to spectate with everyone.

Everyone sighed in relief.

I mean, they can have whatever motives they want, honestly. At the end of the day, we're just watching the girls run. Of course, I can understand some of the guys' desire to prevent their friends or crushes from getting looked at with malicious eyes.

"Kiyotaka, I'm sure you've noticed it, too..." said Akito.

"Yeah. It seems like our female runners will suffer the same fate."

Just by looking at the line-up, it certainly looks like a repeat of what happened earlier.

"Horikita and Nishimura... You said something about a fixed competition between Horikita and Ibuki from Class D, right? Isn't the 100-meter dash too fast-paced for them to decide a real winner?"

"I don't know anything about the specifics of their competition. I don't even know if they only chose one event."

"I see. If Horikita is the one being challenged, then I'll have to assume that Ibuki can put up a fight." Akito turned her eyes to Ryuuko. "Do you think Nishimura can make the top four? She's one of the more athletic girls in the class but..."

"Yeah... Isoyama Nagisa from Class D and Motodoi Chikako from Class B. Both of them are really athletic, especially Motodoi since she's in the Tennis Club."

Akito must've been paying close attention if he could remember how athletic other students were. We only had a limited number of days when we could freely watch the other classes practice, after all.

"You can do it, Horikita-san!"

"Go, go, Ryuuko!"

"Take this home, you two!"

Cheers could be heard from the boys in the spectators' area and the girls on standby. We may have been stationed in different places, but we supported our classmates with the same amount of enthusiasm.

When the signal sounded, Ibuki instantly took the lead.

"Wha-?! Ibuki-chan is fast!" said Ike.

Horikita's reaction was delayed, so she had the worse start. However, she slowly started to gain on her. Ibuki kept glancing at Horikita who was right behind her, and in a matter of seconds, the two were nipped and tucked. Ibuki became panicked while Horikita looked a bit chuffed about such a development. She managed to grab a tiny lead over Ibuki near the end of the race. Ibuki tried to push harder, but the 100-meter dash was as short as it could've gotten. Before she could turn the tides back in her favor, Horikita already crossed the finish line first.

"Woohoo! Let's go Horikita-san!"

"That's our leader!"

The other runners also finished, but as if fate was making fun of us, Ryuuko placed fifth by a small margin.

"Ahh, so close!"

"Nishimura-chan almost had it!"

We could see Ryuuko making apologetic gestures, but the other girls were just smiling at her, probably saying not to mind it.

The second group came along with Onodera as our other ace. When the race finished, she easily took first place. However, Ishikura, her partner, came in last. Well, everyone probably expected it since she was one of the most unathletic girls in our class. The only frustrating fact about her loss was the fact that it

was actually pretty close. Ishikura performed better than ever before and she could've at least gotten sixth if her opponents were any slower.

"Welp, first place is definitely going to Class C's Minamikata Kozue for this group."

Karuizawa and Shinohara were the next pair to go. They were similar in terms of athleticism and that's a huge gamble. It'd be ideal if a two-person package like them could take both top four spots. But if they happen to go against faster runners, then it'd be an instant loss.

"Whaaa! 'The heck was that?! Shinohara definitely got into the top four! That was so unlucky!" cried Ike.

Minamikata cleanly finished in first place, followed by Class B's Nishikawa Ryouko and Class D's Mineshima Eru. The spot for fourth place was hotly contested by Shinohara and the other Class D runner, but in the end, she lost. Karuizawa followed right behind her, placing sixth.

The next five groups were grouped with the same strategy in mind-- that one of them places in the top two while the other places in the top four. However, this tactic was unfortunately shattered by a continuous strain of unlucky match-ups.

"Haruka only placed fourth even though she's one of our faster runners... The same could be said for Azuma-san in the next group, but she only placed third..." muttered Akito.

Our runners kept getting overtaken by opponents who were just a bit faster than them. Of course, some spectacles were seen in groups five and six where Class D's Yajima Mariko and Kinoshita Minori placed first by a wide margin. The same also happened in group seven where Class B's Yano Koharu led the charge.

"Ahh... Hahh... I-It hurts..."

"Here you go, Airi. Have some water."

"T-Thank you, Haruka-chan..."

Airi and Haruka, who were done competing, started walking toward us.

"Ohh, good job out there, Haruka, Airi." Akito waved at them with a smile.

"Yahh, Kinoshita-san from Class D was too fast. I was left in the dust."

"Can't be helped. At least you got fourth," shrugged Akito.

"Nice running, Airi!" Ken gave her a thumbs-up.

"We were watching you go all-out. That was a fantastic result," said Akito.

Airi turned to me for some feedback.

"You did well. You finally beat someone."

She smiled and nodded repeatedly.

"Yes... This is the first time that I didn't finish in last place..."

Even against unathletic girls like Inogashira, Ishikura, or Rino, Airi would still fall short during practice. The student she passed was very similar to her in terms of physical abilities, but she managed to grab the victory in the end and placed seventh. From the position Airi was at, this was the best possible result. Our classmates knew that, as well.

"Go! Mii-chan!"

"Go, go, Satou!"

"You can do it!"

Group eight had Mii-chan and Satou. Satou miraculously placed fourth with Mii-chan finishing seventh. We were finally down to the last two groups.

"Hey, Makida, stop foolin' around. Matsushita's about to run!" called Ken.

"W-Wha-?! Don't be loud about it, Sudou!"

The other guys started nudging their elbows at him. Most of the boys were already aware of his feelings for Matsushita. Anyway, her partner would be Maezono who was fairly fast when it comes to running but had a bad fall this morning.

"Go, go, Sayo-chan!"

"You can do this, Mako-chan!"

Ichinose and Class C's cheers could be heard from the other side of the track. Andou Sayo and Amikura Mako-- both of them are fast runners, too. When the signal sounded, the difference was instantly made clear. Andou and Matsushita were practically running shoulder to shoulder. A Class B girl was behind them competing with Amikura. The rest were left fighting for fifth place.

"Ahh, so close!"

In the end, Andou got the win, but Matsushita got second place. Maezono finished in sixth place after beating the last two girls who were contesting her. She would've easily gotten third if she wasn't feeling pain.

"Final group! We finally get to see Kikyuu-chan compete!" celebrated Ike.

"Stop ogling her you pervert," said Hondou.

"What, you think you can act like Sudou now, Ryoutarou?" Ike bit back with a smirk.

"Yeah, that's right! What, you think you can beat me in a fight with your lanky ass?" Of course, Hondou wouldn't let that slide.

"Stop it, you morons. Both of you are lanky as shit anyways. Just sit tight and enjoy the view, for fuck's sake." Miyamoto smacked the back of their heads.

"The hell wuzzat for?!"

"Just look at Haruki. Don't you see how focused he is?" Miyamoto put his arms around them and asked.

The two of them looked at Yamauchi who was so focused that he looked like he was in a trance.

"Tits... Jiggly tits..."

"H-His concentration is insane!" commented Ike.

"Buncha perverts," scoffed Ken who gave them a side-eye.

Most of the girls were already staying near us as the event progressed. They were either cheering for the remaining runners or rehydrating themselves. Hondou and the others were lucky that none of the girls heard what they were talking about.

"Ohh, it's Kyou-chan and Kokoro-chan!" said Haruka.

"I hope the two of them run well." Airi clasped her hands as if to pray.

Kikyou was currently exchanging pleasantries with one of her opponents, Ichinose Honami.

"They'll be up against Ichinose, of all people. Well, no one is really worth the mention apart from her. Kushida might have the chance to win this." Akito's evaluation was fairly accurate, but due to the lack of data, there was one girl that bypassed his radar.

When the signal sounded, everyone's jaws instantly dropped. It wasn't Ichinose or Kikyou who took the lead. It was Class B's Kamuro Masumi.

"S-She's fast!"

With clean and long strides, Kamuro easily got the victory. The battle for second place was fierce, but Kikyou managed to win against Ichinose by a tiny margin. Her partner, Inogashira, placed seventh, which was honestly not too bad.

And just like that, the 100-meter dash event for the freshmen was finally done and over. While the second-years were preparing, the current scores were tallied and shown on the screen.

"Gahh! The gap just widened!"

"Class B's lead is insane!"

"Even Class D got so many points!"

Red Team: 264 points

- Class 1-A: 99 points

- Class 1-D: 165 points

White Team: 437 points

- Class 1-B: 245 points

- Class 1-C: 192 points

At this point, Horikita stopped getting surprised. The result was

just a byproduct of what was really going on. She asked for Hirata, Kikyou, Karuizawa, and me. It's about time we discuss this development.

Author's Notes:

Vol. 5: Chapter 13.1 - Impending Doom

Horikita analyzed how everything went using the scores that she and Hirata manually tallied earlier.

According to them, having two of our classmates in the top four was a vital win condition. The disparity between fourth and fifth place was night and day. One was an addition of 8 points while the other was a deduction of 1 point. It was a 9-point difference.

Horikita's strategy was to maximize that fact.

They took the boys' round as an example. If Hirata and Ken were to run in the first group, they could easily secure first and second places. But both of them could secure first place if they were to run in different groups. That's why Horikita wanted to spread our potential first-placers while teaming them up with fairly athletic partners to secure the top four. The unathletic ones were also tactically placed to minimize drawbacks.

It's the perfect strategy for random match-ups. Horikita made sure that every pair can yield the best possible result despite their level of athleticism. She couldn't have done it any better in that aspect.

Unfortunately, it ended in disaster. Runners like Minami and Makida had their potential to place higher stunted by extremely unlucky match-ups. Not only that. The same thing happened with the others, too. There were a few students that Ike and Yamauchi could've beaten, and that's even more so for Okitani and Onizuka who were only a bit below average. But in the end, they still finished as the last placers for their respective groups. The ones they could beat were either grouped against Ken, Hirata, or me.

"At first, we would've written this off as bad luck... But after the girls finished, that simply can't be the case anymore. Our few wins were earned too easily while our many losses were very close. If we look at it from a certain perspective, the correlation should be obvious," said Horikita.

"Yes... We think the match-ups had been rigged," Hirata declared with a heavy expression.

Kikyō's eyes narrowed but she wasn't too surprised. Karuizawa, however, seemed to be in shock.

"R-Rigged...? But isn't that impossible? You and Yousuke-kun were the only ones who knew about our class's participation table. And our class was also the last one to submit... How...?"

"Frankly, I still have no idea. The most logical explanation would be Ichinose-san's betrayal. She might have lied to us about Sakayanagi-san submitting Class B's participation table. That in itself is already unlikely, but then what about them knowing every detail of *our* participation table?" Horikita's grim expression only increased Karuizawa's unease.

"This might be a horrible thing to say, but it's possible for there to be a traitor inside the class..." said Kikyou.

"Ehh, a traitor?! Well, it does make sense if you look at it from that angle, but who would do such a thing?!"

"I don't know... I don't want to suspect any of our classmates..." she replied with a pained expression.

"Horikita-san and I could only arrive at the same conclusion as Kushida-san. But I also feel the same way. I don't want to doubt anyone inside the class."

"I can understand where the two of you are coming from, but I'm sure you're already aware of how naive that is." Horikita acknowledged their compassion, but dragged them back to reality.

"Yes, you're right, Horikita-san... That's why we need to investigate and find the truth." Hirata's eyes had a regretful glint. "But... regarding our current state in the sports festival, it's not like we can change anything at this point. We'll just have to make do with our current order."

"Let's keep this to ourselves for now. Telling the class would only cause chaos. For the time being, I would like Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san to keep our classmates in line."

"Sure."

"Leave it to us."

When the two of them left, Horikita turned to me and waited for my thoughts on the matter.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you find the traitor or anything like that. The only thing I can do for the class is to perform well in the sports festival."

"And don't get any ideas about me being the traitor, Horikita-san. I'm not interested in doing that anymore, so it would be great if you could leave me alone." Kikyou dropped her mask and confronted Horikita.

"I already expected those words, and I don't really think any of you would turn traitor." Horikita turned to Kikyou. "With that being said, would you like to help us investigate, Kushida-san?"

"I don't mind, but you don't get to order me around. If I get any clues, then I'll tell you myself."

"That's fine by me."

Kikyou still can't seem to stand Horikita, but at least she's not

antagonizing her to a destructive degree. Even I can vouch for her innocence in this matter. If Kikyou really was the traitor, then I would've stopped her before she could even do anything.

"Say, Kiyotaka-kun. Is the sports festival a lost cause at this point? If the matches are rigged, then we can only hope for our classmates to overperform."

"That's basically the case."

Horikita's expression darkened, but she can't think of any solution.

"Heh, I can't even blame you for this, Horikita-san. In my eyes, I even thought you were being overly cautious and paranoid about the preparations," goaded Kikyou.

"Is that your way of making me feeling better?"

"Whatever you say," she scoffed. "I'm heading back. Good luck on your other events, Kiyotaka-kun. I'll try to keep the class's morale high. We can't have them tired and depressed at the same time."

I returned Kikyou's cheerful wave.

"You alright?" I asked.

"Yes, you don't have to worry about me. I was never under the impression that my plan was unbeatable."

The absence of her absolute arrogance was clearly a sign of growth, but it can also hinder her.

"But I never expected the enemy to beat us this way. We're in a really bad spot, to say the least. I can't believe our participation table got leaked..." she said.

"When you tried to confirm whether Ryuen really submitted Class D's participation table, Chabashira-sensei was the one who helped you, right?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Hmm... Teachers can't obviously say anything that topples the balance of the playing field, but knowing Chabashira-sensei, she might've given you the answer already. Or at the very, she must have given you some sort of clue."

"A clue?"

"Of course, it should be something within the bounds of what a teacher could say. But who knows? I wasn't there, so I can't say for sure."

As the new Class A, I can see that Chabashira-sensei's initial detachment to the class was slowly fading. I thought it was shallow of her to suddenly change just because the class was improving, but I think there's more to it. If my evaluation of her is right, then I'm sure she had already given Horikita the answer she needs.

"I see... I'll mull over it later," Horikita turned to the field. The upperclassmen were just about finished. "For now, we need to brace

ourselves for the rest of the sports festival. It's an uphill battle from here."

"Don't worry. I don't plan on losing any event that I'm participating in."

"Is that so? That's very reassuring," she sighed.

Well, that's under the assumption that I'm going to participate.

Vol. 5: Chapter 13.2 - An Interesting Talk Amongst the Chaos

The next event was the hurdle race. I didn't really expect anything to change since I believed what Horikita and Hirata had speculated. It was too obvious-- too blatant, almost as if Sakayanagi was trying to send a message.

"Gahh! This is hopeless!"

"Run faster guys!"

"Ah, be careful! You'll lose so much time if you keep bumping on the hurdles!"

Everyone tried to cheer for the boys, but it didn't really do much. They were simply outclassed by the other runners in their group. The abundance of close calls was especially frustrating.

Professor and Ijuuin toppled every hurdle and placed last, but at least they finished the race. Hirata and Ken got first place in their respective groups, but their partners can hardly make the top four.

The first-year side of the Red Team should've had the advantage given Sakayanagi's absence in the competitions, but Kouenji leveled the playing field by abandoning the event. He was still staying inside one of the medical tents, looking relaxed.

"Good luck, Kiyotaka-kun," Kikyou cheered for me as I walked inside my lane.

It was finally my turn to participate. As the key runner of the ninth group, I should probably take first place. The Class B students that were pitted against me were also the slowest in their class. This was Sakayanagi's way of telling me that she knew it was futile trying to beat me this way. At the same time, leaving them to eat dust would just make me stand out. And speaking of standing out, this group was very troublesome for me because of one person.

"Oh, Ayanokouji! We're finally up against each other, huh?" Shibata of Class C waved his hand happily.

"Go easy on me," I replied.

"Shouldn't I be the one saying that? I thought you were faster than Sudou and Yousuke."

"They're overestimating me, but I'll try to put up a fight."

"Well, let's have a good one. Even Ichinose was hyping you up, so I'll run like the underdog and do my best."

Our group got into position. When the signal sounded, Shibata and I dashed forward, instantly taking the lead. I could faintly hear the cheers getting louder, but I decided to shift my focus ahead. At first, I adjusted my speed to match that of Shibata but it was a little trickier since he was much faster than the average high schooler. By the end of the race, I inched forward to grab a tiny lead for a very close first place. The footage had to be checked just to be sure, but I was eventually announced as the winner.

"Gahhh, I lost! Man, you're fast as hell, Ayanokouji!"

"I got lucky. There were many times where I thought I would bump on a hurdle."

"Ohh, considering how close we were, I might've won if you touched even one."

"Yeah. Your form was way better than mine."

"Urk-! It's frustrating, but I won't lose next time!"

I went back to the spectators' area where Akito and Ken gave me something to drink. When it was finally the girls' turn, the situation got even more hopeless.

"This is bad. Horikita is up against Kinoshita and Kamuro. Can she even win?" asked Akito.

"It would be difficult, but it's not like we can do anythin' about it. These match-ups are just downright horrendous for our class," said Ken.

In the end, Horikita only got third in their group. It was close, but she couldn't catch up to those who were more athletic than her. Everyone in the class was shocked, but their morale was boosted when Onodera and Mori took first and fourth place, respectively.

"Mori finally got a win," commented Akito.

"It's only a matter of time, ya know? She's pretty unathletic but she's still a member of the volleyball club," said Ken.

"That's surprising. I don't think she applied for any clubs back then," I mused.

"We've talked a buncha times whenever our teams interact about usin' the gyms, so I know. She was a bit late, but she did join durin' the first semester. And in terms of seriousness, Mori's more of a casual member than anythin'. That's what she told me, at least."

"Ehh, is that even allowed? I'm pretty chill in my club, but we can never slack off. Won't Mori's seniors chew her out?" asked Akito.

"Their upperclassmen are pretty lenient, apparently. And they have a lotta skilled senior members, so the first-years hardly get enough motivation to become regulars."

"So none of the new recruits are good, huh? If the third-years are doing most of the heavy lifting, then the team is doomed once they graduate."

"Well, there's Class C's Andou, and one girl from Class B who's really good. I've seen her play a lot during practice with the seniors. I think her name was Busujima...?"

Busujima Rin. She's a really athletic student who's also great in academics. That explains her excellent performance during the 100-meter dash.

"That's her," pointed Ken.

"Ah, that girl."

She took second place very convincingly, only behind Yajima Mariko from Class D. Matsushita from our class came in third after them.

"Ahh, we just can't win against the track and field duo of Class D!" cried Ike.

"Are you falling in love with Kinoshita-san again, Kanji?" Hondou teased him with a smirk.

"Don't even joke about it, Ryoutarou. Remembering what happened back then still pisses me off."

"Well, that goes without saying," he sighed. "That Ryuuen almost expelled you guys."

"I wish I could get back at him," said Yamauchi.

"He's a full-time delinquent with lots of brawny goons at his disposal. What can you even do against that?" asked Miyamoto.

"I personally don't want to challenge that guy with violence, but at least it's satisfying to think that they're the ones in Class D now," said Hondou.

"That's right! Our class is way above them now!"

"But it's not like we can be complacent. Class D may be far away from us, but that's not the case for Class B..."

"You're being quite mature about this, Ryoutarou-dono. I thought you didn't care about anything other than your phone," teased Professor.

"Oh, shut it, Professor. I like reading on my phone, okay?" Hondou poked his nose, looking embarrassed. "And it's important to give as much attention to the people you're talking to. Woah-!"

Ike instantly jumped at Hondou, putting him in a headlock.

"Just admit it, you traitor! You got a girlfriend, didn't you? You're always chatting with someone on your phone, and you're starting to act a lot like Hirata-- even though you're not as handsome as him!"

"I didn't get a girlfriend! I didn't, okay?! And your comment about me being not as handsome as Hirata was uncalled for even though it's true, you bastard!" Hondou repeatedly patted Ike's forearm. "W-What are you getting jealous about, anyway?! You're getting along really well with S-Shinohara, lately! Agh-!"

"Not his girlfriend, but I think they're pretty close at this point.

It's Nishino Takeko from Class D," announced Miyamoto.

"Oi, Soshi! Who told you to run your mouth?!" Hondou, who finally broke free from Ike, panicked with a blush.

"It's fine, isn't it? There's no point in hiding it."

"But still! It's nothing worth talking about!"

Ijuuin chuckled which caught the glare of Hondou.

"The hell are you laughing at, Wataru?!"

"Oh, don't mind me. I just found the situation a bit amusing," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, please correct me if I'm wrong, Ryoutarou-kun. But the reason why you're hiding your affiliation with Nishino-san has something to do with *that book*, right?"

"W-W-Wha-?!"

"Eh...? Did Wataru hit the bullseye...?" Yamauchi gave him a suspicious look.

"Well, Ryoutarou-kun had recently borrowed a light novel series from me. The main character was a moderately social guy, and he has a secret budding relationship with the main heroine who's in another class. I'm very familiar with the story, so I immediately made the connection," he explained.

"Whaaa...? You're trying to act like a light novel protagonist...? Talk about cringe, Ryoutarou." said Yamauchi.

Even Ike was looking at him with a scandalized expression.

"S-Shut up! Okay, I admit that I was trying to emulate the protagonist, but it was just my way of self-development! And my thing with Nishino-- I just wanted to keep it to myself. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Now, now. I said that Ryoutarou-kun's situation was amusing, but I didn't say it was bad. He's being more social and helpful to the class now, and it's not like he's waving his improvement around like some sort of flag. And he's entitled to keep his relationships to himself." Ijuuin defended Hondou.

"I agree with you, Wataru-dono. Putting the matter with the Class D girl aside, even I have absorbed some qualities from fictional characters. All people do. I think the cringe part depends on *how* one applies these qualities to himself."

"Ahh, you're talking about *chuunibyou*, right?" asked Miyamoto.

Professor fixed his glasses with a smirk, but it only took a few seconds before his smile froze. It seems like the word "*chuunibyou*" struck him deep in his core.

"Well, *chuunibyou* is often associated with kids trying to impersonate characters with powers, but that can also extend to those who are trying to copy normal high school protagonists from

romcoms to an excessive degree," Ijuuin explained further.

Ijuuin and I had a discussion about this topic before. He's probably talking about teenagers who want to look calm and cool in front of others, trying to act like Hikigaya Hachiman or Oreki Houtarou. Of course, it can also extend to adults who don't grow out of that phase. (1)

"I'm ain't like that! I'm just trying to be more social! I'm not trying to be a romcom protagonist!" yelled Hondou.

"Well... I guess?" said Ike.

"Oh, shut it. I'm not like you or Haruki. Both of you were already cringe since birth!"

"Hahh, the hell did you say?!"

"Take that back, you bastard!"

The three of them got into some sort of scramble, but Miyamoto was there to smack them out of it.

"Ow, Soshi. That hurt..." Ike turned his attention back to Hondou.

"Anyway, Nishino Takeko-chan, huh? She's from Ryuen's class, though. Do you want to end up like us, Ryoutarou?"

"I'm not gonna confess to her or anything like that. And unlike you guys, I'm alright even if I'm just friends with her," Hondou sighed. "Anyway, stop talking about me or Nishino already."

"I don't want to sound entitled or anything, but what's the harm with telling your best buds now?" asked Ike.

"I didn't want to because I'm sure Miyake and the others can overhear everything, you idiot!"

"Yeah," said Ken.

"Totally," followed Akito.

"See?! This is your fault, Soshi!"

Almost all of the boys in our class could hear them talking. My deepest condolences for you, Hondou.

"If something were to happen, then I would tell you and Haruki. But we're just chatting, you know?"

"Well, I guess so..."

"Hey, Hondou, can I ask you a question?" Yukimura called for his attention.

Everyone tensed up after seeing Yukimura's displeased face.

"Yukimura? What's up? Is there a problem?" asked Hondou.

"I'm sure all of you have noticed something during the sports festival. All of our match-ups are so bad that I think it's been rigged to the enemy's advantage. I was wondering... What if our participation table was leaked to the other classes?"

The atmosphere turned serious.

Hirata and I looked at each other while shaking our heads. So much for Horikita's plan to keep things under the rug. Well, it was

only a matter of time. Our classmates have brains too. Even they would come to the same conclusion eventually.

"Hey, Yukimura. Are you accusing Ryoutarou of leaking the participation table to Class D? That's not cool, man." Miyamoto confronted him, looking provoked.

"I can understand your unrest, Yukimura-kun. Even I can notice the flagrant beating that our class is taking right now... But this is a serious claim from you. First of all, we were the last class to submit our participation table. Even if Ryoutarou-kun did leak the participation table to Class D, it wouldn't do anything."

"Are you sure? What if Ryuuen lied?" Yukimura decided to argue, taking on the role of devil's advocate.

"Horikita-san had already told us everything. Chabashira-sensei was there to confirm his conversation with Sakagami-sensei. Or are you saying that Chabashira-sensei deliberately tried to sabotage us?" Ijuuin's counterargument was solid, so Yukimura conceded that point.

"No, I don't think she would do that. But what about Class B and Class C? There's the possibility of Ichinose betraying our class, so we can't be so sure that Class B submitted their participation table before us. If Hondou leaked our participation table to Nishino, she could probably relay that information to Ryuuen. And since we rejected Ryuuen's proposal to team up, he might've sold our participation table to Class B," Yukimura presented a completely different line of thought.

"That... is indeed possible," muttered Ijuuin.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but I didn't leak our participation table to Nishino. I'm not *that* much of an idiot. And in the first place, Nishino never asked anything like that from me. We're just chatting buddies. Nothing more," Hondou casually rejected Yukimura's idea. "We're currently in the middle of a disaster, so I'm not going to pick a fight with you for being suspicious of me. I could show you our messages as proof, but I won't do that for privacy. You can suspect me all you want, but I can assure you that you'll get nothing from it."

Yukimura stared at Hondou for a brief second before sighing and bowing his head.

"I see... I'm sorry, Hondou. It was extremely rude of me to suddenly spur this onto you."

"It's fine. I'm suspicious of the situation myself. We can probably talk to Horikita-san about this once everything settles down."

Hirata observed the situation with a smile. It seems like the boys in our class were more level-headed than we thought.

When everyone shifted their attention back to the sports festival,

the current score was shown and tallied. We, the Red Team, were currently in the lead, but that's mostly because of the second and third-years. Class 1-A was currently at the bottom of the ranks.

It was finally time for the Capture the Flag event and it'll most likely be another turning point for our class.

Author's Notes:

1. *"This shit makes me sad, and I hardly even feel emotions." - Kiyotaka.*

Vol. 5: Chapter 13.3 - A Desirable Outcome

"Then let's go with that," Ryuuken shrugged without much discussion.

He agreed with Hirata's decision so readily which made us wonder if they're even planning to take this seriously. Class D was already one of the leading classes when it came to running competitions, but they're certainly the top class among the first-years when it came to physical strength.

"Alright, let's win this!" yelled Ken.

The strategy was straightforward and simple. We'll split the attacking and defending teams by class. We'll change roles only if we lose the round. Ryuuken and his class agreed to be the defenders for round one.

Shibata, Kanzaki, Beppu, and the other guys from Class C could be seen leading the fronts for the White Team's attacking group. Kitou, Hashimoto, Katsuragi, and the Class B folks were the ones assigned for defending. Their strategy was the same as ours, which made a lot of sense. None of us have directly cooperated because we were always on guard against each other. Half-baked strategies like these were the most effective considering the little time we have to prepare.

"Sudou-kun, I'll leave the attack to you. Please lead us," said Hirata.

Ken nodded before facing forward.

"Let's do this, you bastards!"

"Ohh!"

Our class seemed hype about this. Class B had more athletic guys than us, but it didn't matter. None of them could beat Ken. We just have to try and attack. Ken will do the heavy lifting for us.

When the signal went off, Ken instantly charged ahead of us.

According to the rules, the attacking sides of each team weren't allowed to make contact, so our forces just brushed past each other. Flagrant violence was obviously prohibited, so kicking or punching will be dealt with harsh punishments. However, the school would overlook a certain degree of roughhousing since actions like pushing or grabbing were expected in a competition like this.

"I'll pave the way for you guys! Attack!" Ken yelled.

Our forces began flowing in like an echelon of birds.

The battle was man-to-man for the most part, some of us were getting double-teamed or triple-teamed like Ken, but that means we could do the same to them. It didn't matter too much in the grand scheme of things, but Koenji's absence made our situation a bit more strenuous than it should've been.

"Get outta my way!"

"Move it!"

"Agh-!"

It was pure pandemonium, but even if my teammates' attention were away from me, I still needed to exert myself in some way to avoid getting scrutinized. Fortunately, I didn't have to create the situation for myself. Two students have already marked me since the beginning of the round.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. Our classmates look like they're having fun. Wanna join them?" Hashimoto asked.

Kitou Hayato was beside him, ready to receive whatever move I do.

"Did Sakayanagi put you guys up for this?" I responded with a question.

"That much is obvious, right? She's giving you an offer. Would you like to accept?"

"Offer?" I already knew what he meant, but I decided to play dumb.

"You, Hirata, and Sudou are key players for the Class A boys. Once you're gone, it will certainly benefit us. Kitou and I were tasked to *remove* one key player from this competition. Sakayanagi told us to pick whoever we wanted, so we chose you. She told us to give our target an offer. If you *cooperate*, things will be easier for you."

I see... It didn't seem like Sakayanagi said anything about me. How considerate of her. She even manipulated Hashimoto into targeting me. Going for high-profile students like Ken or Hirata would've been too obvious, so I was the best prey. I wouldn't call myself low-key due to my past achievements in the first semester, but I was still less high-profile than the princely Hirata or the top athlete Ken. Only the first-years would consider me "popular".

Sakayanagi must've reassured him that it's Horikita who's behind the wheel this time. So for Hashimoto, I was just the former mastermind of the now-Class A-- a cunning leader who managed to outsmart Ryuuen and Katsuragi in the past. After stepping down, I became nothing but a well-rounded model student like Kikyuu.

No... To Hashimoto, I was even less of a threat than Kikyuu due

to my lack of social skills and connections.

I don't know about Kitou, but Hashimoto genuinely thinks that he could beat me in a physical match. After all, I was just an athletic guy who could run and swim fast. *That night* really paid off, huh?
(1)

"I don't get it, but I need to take your team's flag," I replied.

"That's unfortunate. We'll just have to do this the "harder" way, then."

"Come at us," Kitou uttered calmly.

Without wasting any time, I immediately dashed to their left. They were caught off-guard, but their reaction was pretty fast. Unfortunately for them, I made a non-committal action. I instantly changed direction which nearly made them lurch.

"You're really fast, man."

We were close enough to crash onto each other, but I barely managed to slip past them.

"Got'cha!"

Before I could reach the pole, Hashimoto managed to grab my wrist. His grip was intense, and it bought enough time for Kitou to run towards my flank. Each subtle movement was necessary. I was bound by the two of them, but that only last for a few seconds. Looking at my surroundings, I realized that the three of us were completely covered by the chaos. Since we were in the middle of everyone, none of the spectators would be able to see us. That was the perfect time to strike.

"Hng-!"

Kitou "stumbled" while he was grabbing onto my waist, but it almost felt like a suplex. This caused both of us to drop to the ground. And in that split second, Hashimoto was there to follow it up.

"Nothing personal, Ayanokouji." Hashimoto muttered under his breath.

He "accidentally" stepped on my forearm without looking at me. Because of my lack of reaction, Hashimoto stomped on my arm for a second time while grabbing the nearest guy as if his attention wasn't on me. He did it one last time before tripping and crashing onto me and Kitou. Because of that, his elbow also struck my chest. The force wasn't just composed of gravity. Hashimoto intentionally dropped his elbow on me.

The two of them quickly stood up and started helping their classmates. In the end, Ken and the others managed to topple the post and capture the flag. Class C couldn't pierce Ryuuen's defenses, especially with Yamada Albert guarding the pole at range zero.

My classmates celebrated as the dust settled. I walked up to them

but was immediately yelled at by Akito and Ken.

"Kiyotaka!"

They saw my arm which was riddled with dirt. Shoe marks were drawn by the scratches and graze that my arm sustained. The swelling looked particularly bad. It'll become a large bruise if left untreated.

"My bad... I think I'm fine," I said.

"No, you're not! Your arm is swollen as hell!"

A bunch of medical personnel rush toward us, asking the same thing. They checked my torso and found another red mark on my chest. Hashimoto stepped forward and talked to them.

"Um, I think I accidentally stepped on Ayanokouji while we were having that chaotic match. For the contusion on his chest, I'm not sure. I just vividly remember that it was him that I inadvertently collided with." He calmly told them the events that unfolded, framing everything as an unfortunate mishap.

"Is that true?" The head personnel turned to ask me.

Ken angrily approached Hashimoto, but he was stopped by Akito.

"Tch, you must've injured Kiyotaka on purpose!"

"Ken, calm down. This isn't the time!"

Hashimoto looked down and stared at me with a smirk.

"Yes," I replied.

I let Hashimoto finish his little story, so he probably already expected that I wasn't going to say anything against him. Even if I tried to push for foul-play accusations, the footage wouldn't catch anything decisive. They made it look like a legitimate accident.

"Alright. We'll get you some treatment inside one of the medical tents. But for now, you're not allowed to participate in any future events."

Ken, Akito, and even Hirata could only grimace after hearing those words. We won the first round, but at the cost of one student. If I didn't recover in time, we'll not only have two disqualifications for the All-Participant events. We'll also have to make substitutions for my slots in the Recommended-Participant events. Of course, that's not the most pressing issue about this. If I was incapable or mediocre, then it wouldn't impact our class that much. But I was one of the few students in our class who could grab first place on demand. My absence can only bring harm to our already-dire circumstances.

I walked off the field while being supported by Akito.

The girls were currently busy with their ball toss which was a relief. I didn't want this commotion to disturb their focus.

"Sorry, Hirata. I was careless."

"You don't have to apologize, Ayanokouji-kun. That doesn't

matter right now. Please get some treatment and rest..." He knew that losing me was fatal, but Hirata chose to show concern instead of frustration.

My other classmates were the same on the surface, but I wouldn't be able to guess what was truly on their minds.

Ken promised to "avenge" me, and as expected, our team won the Capture the Flag event. And with that, the first-year boys started getting ready for the tug-of-war.

"What a barbaric way to skip out. You're lacking in sophistry, boy." Kouenji, the one who excused himself due to sickness, didn't look sick at all.

"I have no idea of what you're talking about, Kouenji."

He stopped looking at the mirror and turned to me.

"Oh, please. I'd advise you to stop treating me like those half-wits. Your current condition is one that you've hoped for..." Kouenji scoffed before continuing. "Well, not hoped, but planned. You're not the type of person who thinks about how the lowly ones see him. I fail to see why you'd go to such lengths just to preserve your *"reputation"*, as you call it."

"The type of person I am, huh? How are you so sure that you know?"

"I am the symbol of perfection. Therefore, my words and thoughts are also perfectly correct. Flawless logic, isn't it?"

"I guess so."

"A wise agreement," Kouenji went back to checking himself out with the mirror. "Well, no matter. Even if you refrain from answering, your motives are already known to me."

"It's known to others, as well. I'm not really trying to hide it."

"To avoid trouble, huh? How ridiculous."

I decided to ignore him entirely. I lay on my back and ignored the matches, too. I honestly didn't care if we won or not.

Author's Notes:

1. Kiyotaka's manipulation of Hashimoto's perception of him goes all the way back in Volume 3 when he made it look like Ryuen was about to beat him up.

Vol. 5: Chapter 13.4 - Their Plan

"No one else is here. You can drop the acting now, boy."

"Seems like it," I replied, stretching my arm. "I could probably still compete without any problems even with these injuries. It looks bad from a visual standpoint, but I actually didn't sustain much damage. It's not even that painful anymore."

"Hmph, how unsightly. As someone who's destined to be admired, I personally wouldn't let any of those ninnies blemish my beauty. However, I would give your boring face some credit. Your expression never changed, almost like you weren't even injured in the first place."

"Uh... thanks...?"

Well, it's not ideal, but I wanted everything to be simple and straightforward. And besides, these injuries shouldn't develop into bruises if I get them treated later.

I got up with the excuse of heading to the bathroom. In truth, I made my way to a specific classroom that had one of the best views of the athletic field. I didn't really care if cameras saw me loitering around. The repercussions shouldn't be too severe given my injury. I can just tell them I wanted a better view of the games from high up.

"Fufufu. You're finally here, Ayanokouji-kun."

Sakayanagi elegantly sat on top of a desk, looking relaxed. But I knew it must've been quite the journey for someone like her to get here.

"You could've asked them to be a bit more gentle."

"There was at least a 10% chance for them to choose the agreeable Hirata-kun, but in the end, you were the ideal target. So even if I didn't really give them any specific instructions to target you in particular, I knew that this would be the outcome. As their superior, please do forgive them."

"Don't worry. This is honestly just fine," I said before moving a desk beside a window. "Removing me was the best move you could've made for your team."

"Thank you for the compliment, but I know you saw it from a mile away already."

"And since you still did it, you must've been confident that I'd cooperate."

"Confident? Oh, please, Ayanokouji-kun. The moment Hashimoto-

kun and Kitou-kun chose you as their target, I already knew that your cooperation was set in stone. After all, you were also hoping to get removed."

I recalled our first meeting. Sakayanagi probably knew that I didn't want to stand out anymore. So removing me was a win for the two of us. After all, I didn't have the luxury of holding back. But if my absence was valid, then I can avoid the spotlight while keeping my reputation in class intact. At the same time, Class B would have an easier time beating Class A.

"Sudou Ken-kun is a bit troublesome, but he won't be able to carry your class for that long."

"So you're planning to remove him, as well?"

"Why, of course. To destroy Class A, I have to be thorough."

I already have a pretty good guess on how she'd do that.

"I see," I replied, watching the Tug of War.

The boys seemed to be winning, but the girls were losing, which was pretty ironic since our Red Team was missing two boys while the White Team was missing one girl.

"Are you sure about not interfering?"

That question solidified my guess on how Sakayanagi will get rid of Ken. It also caused a chain of confirmations about how she planned everything.

"Yeah. You can do what you want. I don't really care."

"Fufufu, that's reassuring. Well, I'm sure your plate is already full enough," Sakayanagi narrowed her eyes as she stared at me.

"Shouldn't it be the opposite? I don't have to worry about being the leader, and I'm not obligated to plan things out during class battles. It's like having a vacation." (1)

Sakayanagi chuckled before giving me a meaningful smile. She probably already knew that I was lying, but I wasn't in the mood to talk about my personal plans.

"Aren't you going to watch the matches more carefully? Staring off into the distance... It seems like you have something else on your mind," she said.

"I've seen them practice, so I already know what to expect. The only question is whether their morale will completely collapse."

"You're probably right. Given the Class A students' lack of mental maturity and resolve, they were bound to become more cynical, unmotivated, and detached in the face of absolute defeat. At first, I was confident that I could easily shatter your classmates' spirits. I thought it wasn't a matter of *"if"*, but a matter of *"when"*, but they're surprisingly much harder to break," she sighed.

"It's not strange for them to grow over time," I said.

"Oh please, Ayanokouji-kun. That's cruel even as a joke," she

giggled. "Both of us know that there wasn't any *"growth"* involved. The reason for this development would be your current position in the class hierarchy. Most of your classmates would've already given up a long time ago if they were still in Class D."

I couldn't do much about how my classmates thought about everything. Forcing immature adolescent teenagers to work hard and study was the same as asking little children to eat their despised vegetables. That's why I gave them some *candy*, which in this case, was the opportunity to graduate in Class A. In other words, I just used their simple-mindedness to my advantage. That's how I was able to control them all this time.

It'll take Sakayanagi a bit more to break Class A. After all, the opportunity I created gave them "hope". That's why their morale was a lot sturdier than what you might expect from a bunch of selfish and impulsive 16-year-olds.

"Are you leaving?" she asked.

"Well, we have to. You should also get back soon. The two of us shouldn't really be seen together since we're from different teams, so I'll be going on ahead."

Security cameras don't really bother me, but it would be troublesome if my classmates saw me walking around with Sakayanagi.

"Fufufu. Seeing you try to preserve your current reputation in class very much amuses me," she giggled.

"I don't want them to hate me, after all."

That was another lie. To be honest, I couldn't care less about how my classmates felt about me. However, the reputation I've built up cost some time and effort. Having decent social clout makes things a lot easier in my position. It's also a good shield since enemies might see it as a weakness when it's really not.

As long my image as the "reliable ex-leader" is useful, I don't mind sparing some effort to preserve it.

"Such a dependable classmate, you are. But when your class finally hits rock bottom, I wonder how hard they'll beg for you to save them?"

I ignored Sakayanagi and walked towards the door. She turned away from me and continued watching the competitions.

"Please send my regards to Kikuchi Eita-kun," she said.

I see. So the reason why Sakayanagi told me to come here was this... That's their plan, huh? It'll be one heck of a pain in the butt for Horikita and the others.

"Sure thing," I replied.

Author's Notes:

1. *Kiyotaka inhaling some copium.*

Vol. 5: Chapter 14.1 - The Lonely Queen

Everyone's cheers could be heard as I walked through the main building's corridors. Class 1-A should be losing in most individual competitions, but their fighting chances are solid with Class D backing them up. Well, it's not like Ryuuken would put in the effort to do that, but they can't just throw the games either.

"Oh? It seems like we have another lost one loitering about."

A female voice reverberated inside my ears. When I turned around, the face I saw wasn't at all familiar. Seeing the white bandana on her wrist, she must be a senior from Class B or Class C.

"Um, is there anything you need from me?"

"Oh, don't mind me. I just find it amusing that a couple of cute first-years are skipping out on such a fun event."

I could say the same for you.

A "couple of cute first-years", huh? I guess she saw Sakayanagi at some point, too.

"Hey now, I'm not going to bite, okay? You don't have to be *that* cautious. I'm just trying to create some small talk."

Cautious, is it? Wouldn't you usually think of the other person as awkward or nervous?

"I'm sorry... I just... don't know what to say."

"Ahaha, don't apologize now, Kouhai." She laughed merrily as if amused. "Are you going to keep on skipping out? If so, then why not hang out with me?"

Another unexpected question. I'm suddenly getting picked up like a girl in Shinjuku. Calling the situation "weird" would be an understatement here.

"Why me?" I asked in a calmer tone.

"Hehh... So you finally stopped acting like a nervous wreck, huh? It doesn't really suit you."

I see. That guy... He must have a reason for this.

"I understand. Then I guess we could go to the infirmary. Please head on first, Senpai."

She smirked and turned around before walking. Since we were from different teams, we can't really be seen walking together. I'm sure she knew that, as well.

We got to the infirmary in silence. There were no patients inside so far. The ones who needed primary treatment were still stationed

inside the tents. I opened the door and saw her sitting on a plastic chair. I moved the curtain covering one of the beds and sat. It shouldn't be a problem since I had an actual injury.

"You got anything to say?" she asked.

"What do you want to hear?"

"Anything is fine. It's enough as long as I can figure out what sort of person you are. Think of it as a test."

I'm still in the dark, so the risk of failing this "test" isn't something I'm willing to take.

"What's your name, Senpai?"

She leaned back and shoved her long platinum-blond hair behind.

"Kiryuuin Fuuka," she replied.

Kiryuuin Fuuka, is it? She smiled expectantly in anticipation to what I would say next.

"So, Kiryuuin-senpai. How much did Horikita-senpai tell you, exactly?"

She lit up and clapped her hands once.

"Perfect score!" she said. "How interesting... Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. I thought the president was hyping you up too much, but you might not be as boring as I initially thought you'd be."

Well, if I gave you a boring answer, then it might derail my plans into something more tedious.

"Sorry, but could you please tell me what's going on?"

"I will. But first, you have to tell me what *you think* is going on."

How troublesome.

"I assume Horikita-senpai told you something about me. I don't think he's the type of person who would blabber without any thought, so this might have something to do with his goal of stopping Nagumo Miyabi."

She nodded with a satisfied expression.

"Mhm, and?"

"Well, that's about it. I might be able to infer more things if you tell me which class you're from."

"Oh, really? I'm from Class 2-B. Does that help?"

Kiryuuin did not even hesitate on her reply. There was no subtlety in our conversation. She's not afraid of feeding me any amount of information, answering away with a grin.

"I see..." I looked at her with a sigh. "It seems like I've stumbled upon another strange person..."

"Hey, now. Stop thinking out loud, will ya? You can't expect me to get fooled by your compliments just because I'm a little interested in you."

So being called "strange" is a compliment now?

"I called you strange for how laid back you're acting. In the first place, you wouldn't think about messing with a first-year when students like Horikita Manabu and Nagumo Miyabi are around, right? Capable students like them should be more interesting."

"No need for that kind of prefacing, Ayanokouji. Just ask me what my goal is. That's what you want to know, right?"

That's a bummer. I thought she'd at least let me have some more info at my own pace.

I've only had an indirect interaction with Nagumo once since he was talking to Horikita, but I still managed to make a reasonable evaluation on his thought process. Based on this conversation, Kiryuuin's sharpness should stand on a similar level.

"Alright then, Senpai. What would you gain out of this?"

"That's pretty simple. By meddling in your matters, I hope I could at least receive some amount of entertainment."

"Entertainment?"

"I'm bored, obviously. That's what every excellent student tend to feel. Aren't you the same, Ayanokouji?"

"I would normally deny my excellence, but it's not like you're going to believe me at this point."

"Horikita-senpai doesn't interest me anymore, but I won't doubt his words."

"I figured," I sighed, going back on topic. "Just living my high school days in peace is enough for me. I don't really mind being bored."

"Really? Then why did you let Horikita-senpai hook you in? That Nagumo is a pain in the ass, you know?"

Her lady-like appearance didn't suit her language.

"There's benefit for me, as well. Trying to go against Nagumo-senpai is just a means to an end."

"Is that so? I wish he could hear you right now," she smirked.

Since Horikita Manabu told her about me, then she must have given her word to at least not rat me out. It'd be quite annoying if Nagumo prematurely discovers my actual role.

"I'd rather not... I'm trying to hide from him, after all."

"I know. Horikita-senpai told me. I promised not to say anything to Nagumo since Horikita-senpai's agenda would also get disrupted. But it's not like I needed to do that at all. There's no way I'd let Nagumo know about you."

"Why is that?" I asked.

Kiryuuin leaned in, scoffing as she smirked.

"Obviously, because it'd be extremely boring."

"Are you going to cooperate with Horikita-senpai, then? I thought you weren't interested in him."

"Being interested and cooperating are two completely different things, aren't they? Though, in Horikita-senpai's case, both of them don't apply. I don't really find him interesting-- or at least not anymore. And it's not my thing to "cooperate" with anyone, not even Horikita-senpai."

"So in conclusion, you're here to see what kind of person Horikita-senpai is banking on to fight Nagumo Miyabi. And you're going to assume the role of an observer, I assume."

Regarding the second half of what I said, I don't think it'd be the case at all. But it's better to lower her expectations by getting some things wrong. At least, I can afford to do that now.

"Come on, Ayanokouji. You still don't get me? You got the first one right, but just watching would bore me to death. Depending how things go, I might end up fighting you or Nagumo. Who knows? I'm sure it'll be more fun that way."

"I can only pray for things to not end up in that direction."

Before I could continue speaking, Kiryuuin shot up and stretched her arms with a moan.

"That's it for now, Kouhai. You'll probably start extracting some information on Nagumo, but it'd give you too much of an advantage which would be pretty uninspiring," she said, cutting the conversation right where it mattered.

"I'll go ahead and take back some points. I don't wanna lose too much money for slacking, after all."

Her tall and elegant figure walked out of the infirmary. After glancing at one of the cameras on the ceiling, I approached the area of the room where the medical equipment and medicine are located, and tried to treat my injuries.

Vol. 5: Chapter 15.1 - I'm Not Interested

"Goddamn it!"

Ken ground his teeth in frustration.

"Kiyotaka... You're back," said Akito.

"I made a visit to the infirmary. How did everything go while I was gone?" I asked.

"Well, as you can see, it's pretty bad. We won the Tug-of-War, but the Obstacle Course Race and the Three-Legged Race went just as horribly as the first two events..." Akito looked away with a frustrated expression. "And the Cavalry Battle..."

"Hey now, Class A. You better step it up. I don't want to keep carrying your asses all throughout the festival," chided Ryuen.

"Shut the hell up! You abandoned us in the Cavalry Battle!" yelled Ken.

"Abandoned? Are you that pathetic, Sudou? We may be from the same team, but we did our best and won. It's your fault for getting annihilated first. Instead of yapping your excuses like a dog, you should probably thank me for salvaging your failures," countered Ryuen.

A bunch of school staff was staring at us. We shouldn't escalate this any further.

"Ken, it's fine. We can't do anything about it now..."

"Damn it... I'll fuckin' sock that guy..." Ken cursed under his breath.

"Ayanokouji-kun, are you alright?" Hirata approached us with a worried look.

"Yeah. I think I can participate in the 200-meter dash."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll try. The physician said I'm allowed to run, at least."

"I see... Your presence will be a huge help, in more ways than one..."

The others' expressions turned grim as soon as Hirata said those words. Something must've happened while I was gone.

It was almost time for us to get ready. The next event will be the last one before a 50-minute lunch break. I turned my sights toward the girls who were currently engaged in the heated round of their Cavalry Battle.

"Tsk... Those bastards... They're using the same tactic," muttered

Ken.

It was a fairly straightforward strategy. The Class D cavaliers try their best to evade while playing defense. After Class A's squadrons get tired and eliminated by the combined forces of Class B and Class C, that's when they'll strike back. I'm not sure if it'll go as smoothly for Class D's girls, though. I noticed that they're actually lacking in numbers.

I see... So that's what happened.

Meanwhile, the girls from our class looked extremely distressed. And Horikita... After getting pincered by Ichinose and Kamuro's group, her bandana was easily stolen as she fell from her horse.

"Hahh... Hahh... Dang... I ran like my life depended on it, and I still got seventh!" cried Ike.

Yamauchi and the others uttered similar things, but it can't be helped.

"Woohoo! Good stuff, Ayanokouji!" Onizuka celebrated.

"Hahh, I can't show off now. I'm too damn slow," laughed Kikuchi.

I'll probably confront him later about what Sakayanagi told me.

Anyway, I managed to get a first during the 200-meter dash. The fast runners got great results, but both the average and slow runners got left severely behind. The same went for the girls. However, Horikita, who was supposed to be a prime candidate for first place, only got sixth. And just like that first half of the sports festival came to an end.

The mood was dark for Class A. We were hundreds of points behind Sakayanagi's class. Thanks to the seniors, the Red Team was still winning, but we'll surely lose the class battle.

"Ayanokouji-kun..." Horikita approached me with a pained look.

"What are you doing, competing at that state?" I asked. "You're injured, aren't you?"

"I'm..."

I crouched down and raised the hem of Horikita's jogging pants. As expected, her ankle was severely swollen, and it'll only get worse the more she forces herself. The class knew about this, but she must've insisted on participating.

"Your condition is a lot worse than mine."

"But..."

"It's useless even if you try to fight on. I'm not saying we should give up, but you should look at things objectively. You're only putting yourself in more danger. There's no point in taking any

more risk."

Presented with such an argument, Horikita could only agree.

"I was careless..." she said.

"It can't be helped, right? You were outsmarted, and now you're getting the full brunt of Sakayanagi and Ryuuen's attacks."

Horikita quickly glanced if anyone was trying to listen in.

"The traitor... I need to know who they are."

"And what does that fix?"

"Nothing... At least, not right now. I recognize that there's not much we can do at present, but I'm worried about the future. The class will be in trouble if this keeps happening."

"I see. Then I wish you good luck."

After a short pause, Horikita spoke again.

"Are you willing to help me?" she asked.

"Are you asking for my help?" I instantly returned the question which made Horikita freeze.

"I know I can't keep relying on you, but..."

"Is leading the class too hard for you?"

"It is hard. I already knew that beforehand. Even if it was a very short time, I've been watching you lead us since the very beginning..." Horikita's eyes trembled. "But I know I can do it."

"Then why are you asking for my help?"

She looked up, facing me head-on.

"Because you're part of the class, too. You're a weapon that can take us out of this rut. It's too wasteful not to use you. If you'll allow me, then..."

"Use me, huh? If I'm being completely honest, I'm quite fond of that idea. You're completely in the right to try and utilize me as an asset," I sighed, shaking my head. "But unfortunately, I'm not interested in helping you find the traitor. I also got my own set of problems."

"I see." Horikita closed her eyes, but her expression remained unchanged. "I'll do something about this on my own, or rather, with Hirata-kun and the others' help. That said, I'd greatly appreciate it if you ever give us a hand."

"Sure. It's not like I'm doing this out of spite. You already know the kind of person I am, anyway. I'd just rather not get involved in any of the potential drama. That's the complete opposite of a peaceful life."

"I understand, Ayanokouji-kun. Maybe I just... need to calm down and think about everything more clearly."

"You can do that, but at least get your leg checked first. Someone else can act as your substitute for the rest of the events."

This was probably the hardest pill to swallow for Horikita right

now.

Before she and I could go on our separate ways, the people who had been watching us from a distance finally came up and approached us.

"Horikita-san!"

"Ichihashi-san?" Horikita turned around saw Ichihashi along with two other girls; Azuma and Ryuuko.

"Heya, Horikita-san. Did you have plans with Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Azuma.

"Not really. I was just about to leave," I replied.

"Ohh, I see!" she said, looking back at Horikita. "You're gonna visit the infirmary after getting your injury checked, right?"

The physicians were inside the tents, but the beds were inside the infirmary.

"Yes..." Horikita replied with a slightly confused expression.

"Is it alright if we accompany you?"

"Accompany me? But why...?"

"Well, we were pretty worried when you got injured..." said Ryuuko.

"This is your precious lunch time. You shouldn't waste your chance to rest," replied Horikita.

"It's not like we're gonna do anything physically taxing, you know~? And there's plenty of time to eat after we get your injury checked. We'll just have lunch together by then." Azuma's proposal was hard to decline, even for Horikita.

"This was initially Nene-chan's idea. She was supposed to be here, but she had some business with Kikuchi-kun," said Ichihashi.

"This is a bit puzzling for me. Is there any underlying reason why you want to come with me?" Horikita asked bluntly.

Azuma grabbed Horikita's arm in a cuddly way.

"We've always wanted to get closer to you, you know? We can't have Ayanokouji-kun having you all to himself." She turned to me with a smug smirk. "You were about to leave, right? Shoo, shoo~!"

Azuma was shooing me away like a stray dog.

"See you around then, Ayanokouji-kun." Ichihashi gave me a small wave.

"Bye-bye, Kiyotaka-kun. We'll take care of Horikita-san," followed Ryuuko.

I didn't really have the energy to say anything else, so I just waved my hand at them. It's good to see Horikita making more friends-- or at least I hope that's what happens. Well, with Azuma around, I'm sure they'll hit it off without a problem. I hope.

I thought about what to eat for lunch as I walked to the cafeteria. The class traitor or whatever should be the least of my concerns

right now.

"I'm not interested in helping you find the traitor."

It's true that I wasn't interested in *helping* Horikita find the traitor. But I never said anything about *not* trying to find the traitor myself.

Vol. 5: Chapter 15.2 - I'll Protect You

"Finally... Solitude..."

Ken and the others invited me for lunch, but I passed. Most of my classmates approached me or sent me a message regarding my injuries, but I told them I was fine. I've had enough social interactions for today.

At this moment, I thought about my so-called "enemies". Sakayanagi, Ryuen, Kiryuuin, Nagumo... So many people are getting in the way.

After the first semester, I thought that it would've been pointless to continue my Self-Test after getting to Class A, but Sakayanagi begged to differ. I don't mind seeing what she can do. Our chess match was definitive proof of her abilities. That girl was a genius, and a natural one at that. She might be weak on the physical side, but given her display of intellect and wit back then, it's still up for debate whether or not she's on par with a White Room student in certain aspects.

Then there's Nagumo... He's probably going to be the root of all my future problems. I can only guess his true goals in reshaping part of the school's system, but if I'm to believe Horikita Manabu's warning, then he'll be a pain in the butt regardless.

And for Kiryuuin... Well, I don't really know anything about her. With how our conversation went earlier, it didn't seem like she'll get associated with me again anytime soon.

My main problem right now would be Ryuen. I should get him off my case soon. It'd be ideal if Horikita can grab his attention. That said, his plans will soon bear fruit, and once that happens...

"Hahh... I finally found you."

Speak of the devil.

"Kikyou...?"

I was currently spending my lunchtime in the Tea Ceremony Club's clubroom. Konishi-senpai gave me permission, and I was allowed to use the A/C. What a kind senpai. Secretary Tachibana could learn from her.

"Sigh... I don't think I would've been able to find you if I didn't happen to encounter Konishi-senpai." She shook her head in dismay.

"That was the plan from the start. I'm actively trying to *not* be

found by anyone."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Am I being a nuisance?"

"Not really. You're just one person, after all."

Kikyou smiled after hearing my response.

"Tired of all of your friends talking to you?" she chuckled teasingly.

"Yeah, kinda..."

I sat on the floor while leaning against the wall. My packed lunch was laid down in front of me, ready to be devoured. This would be my first time trying out this neat and meaty bento set. Of course, I bought an extra in case one wasn't enough for me.

"Can I stay with you here?" Kikyou asked gently.

"Sure..." I replied while whispering *'itadakimasu'*.

Sitting beside me, Kikyou began humming. She stared at me with a huge grin on her face. The sun rays that illuminated the room can never really match how bright Kikyou looks every time.

"You're so cute," she said.

"Hm? Where did that come from?"

"Nothing. You just look cute."

I don't know if that's something you'd usually say to a guy eating his meal.

"Uh, thanks, I guess."

Ah, so this was what the other guys were talking about. Girls would call them "cute" when they'd rather get called "cool" as praise. Kikyou was probably complimenting me, but I didn't feel complimented at all.

"Mhm, go on. Don't mind me."

"Why don't you eat, too? I've got an extra if you want it."

"Ohh, thanks. But it's fine. I already ate lunch earlier. Please eat to your heart's content," she said.

"And you'll just keep watching me?" I asked.

"Yep! Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"Hmm... No, not really. You can do whatever you want." It wasn't anything new. I was used to people watching me while I ate.

"Then, I'll take you up on that offer." Kikyou rested her cheeks on top of her knees as she faced me. I suddenly remembered that time when I was alone with Ichinose on the luxury cruise ship, and that other time with Haruka in the forest.

I started eating with Kikyou's eyes on me. Thanks to her presence, my mind was able to relax a bit.

"So? Why were you looking for me?" I asked before serving a spoonful of food inside my mouth.

"Three reasons. Firstly, I'm tired of interacting with everyone so I ran away. But at the same time, I didn't want to be alone. Secondly,

I wanted to ask your opinion on the current state of the sports festival." Kikyō's dramatic response resembled that of a teacher giving an explanation.

"And the third reason?"

She touched her lips with her index finger while giving me a seductive smile.

"I just wanted to spend some time with you, my dearest best friend, Kiyotaka-kun~."

Whenever she did something like this, my heartbeat would get out of control. But now, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I know Kikyō more than anyone else in this school. I'm used to her constant teasing.

"That's... fine, I guess..." Damn. So much for that monologue. My heart is pounding like crazy right now.

"Ehh, poker face, as usual? Aren't you at least happy?"

I'm glad nothing was shown from my facial expressions.

"I am happy, I just-."

"You just can't express it well." She completed my words while mimicking my expression. "I know that already, and I think it's pretty cute."

"Again...? What part of it is cute...?" I sighed.

Kikyō only replied with a giggle. Now *that* was cute. Meanwhile, her reason for calling me cute still remains a mystery.

"So? What do you think? Does Class A still have a chance of winning?" she asked.

"Nope. It's a guaranteed loss, for the interclass battle, at least. The seniors are doing some amazing heavy lifting for the Red Team. We'll probably win in the team battle."

"Hmm... So even if we lose 100 class points for getting last place in the interclass battle, Sakayanagi-san's class would also lose 100 class points if the Red Team wins the overall event. I guess that's somewhat reassuring."

Of course, they would at least minimize their loss down to 50 class points if they place first in the interclass battle.

"Yeah. There's no point in trying to win after what just happened. Sakayanagi outplayed Horikita."

"It's not just Sakayanagi-san, right? I'm sure Ryūen-kun is working with her. The win-loss trades between Class B and Class D were far too convenient to be a coincidence."

"You're probably right."

"This is a pain... Who's the traitor, anyway? What's their motive for doing this?"

"You don't have any idea?" I asked, probing Kikyō to make her own hypothesis.

"Hmm... With the information we have now, one possibility might be an internal rebellion of some sort. After you stepped down, the traitor might've deemed Horikita-san an unworthy leader. So instead of trying to help the class maintain its Class A status, they took Sakayanagi-san's side instead," she explained.

"That's a good hunch."

"I mean... Class A and Class B had polar opposite developments after the first semester. I don't know much about Sakayanagi-san's abilities, but her classmates are treating her like a savior that will push their class back on top. Meanwhile, Horikita-san's leadership is still a bit questionable. And personally, I see her as a downgrade compared to you."

"As things stand now, I think even Horikita would agree with your assessment."

"Hmph. It's good that she knows her place," pouted Kikyuu. "That said, there might be some other factors involved regarding the traitor's betrayal. *You're* still in this class. You can always decide to take over as our leader again and beat Class B. The traitor should know that."

"Maybe they think that I'm not a match for Sakayanagi," I said.

"*Thanks for the meal,*" I thought as I put my hands together.

"I doubt it," she scoffed. "But even then, it still doesn't make sense. Let's say that Sakayanagi-san was indeed a better leader than you. The traitor should be close enough to know her true abilities. But she'd been working from behind the scenes until Katsuragi-kun's faction collapsed, so none of our classmates would've been closer to her than they were to you-- at least not until after the Zodiac Exam."

"None of our classmates seem suspicious to you?" I put the empty bento box inside the plastic bag as I shifted my sitting position.

"Not really... I know our classmates very well, and none of them seemed to be in close contact with Sakayanagi-san. And I would've noticed any sort of weird behavioral changes from anyone if their betrayal was recent."

"Which means that they're so good they could hide from even you... or they've been colluding with Sakayanagi since the very beginning."

"The latter seems... unrealistic," said Kikyuu.

"Yep, so we can probably take it out of the equation. The number of potential suspects significantly goes down as a result."

"Oh, you're right, Kiyotaka-kun! There should only be a handful of people in our class who are somewhat on guard against even me," she nodded excitedly.

My body was starting to relax. The cold air was a huge contrast to

the blazing heat outside. Our shoulders touched as we slowly felt each other's warmth.

"You know... I felt really nervous seeing how badly our class was getting beat up. Our classmates feel really down about it."

Kikyou stretched her legs in front, matching my posture. Her right foot repeatedly swayed, gently hitting my left ankle.

"If the Red Team wins, we'll still be Class A by the end of the festival. There's nothing to worry about."

"That's reassuring..." Kikyou slowly leaned her head on my shoulder. "It's funny. The sudden relief made me feel a little bit sleepy."

"There's only about twenty minutes before lunch break ends. Do you want to stay here until then?"

"Yes, but... Are you alright with that?"

"I don't really have anything to do. We can just go back together afterward."

"Really now? You can just say it, you know? Say you want to spend time with me~?" Her teasing grin was adorable, but as usual, Kikyou couldn't hide her own embarrassment with how much she was blushing.

"You know, Kikyou. What you assume people want reflects on what *you* want yourself."

Her laughter stopped as she turned stiff. It was the perfect counter to her words, and Kikyou got stuck in embarrassment. But it didn't last long.

"Well... It *is* what I want. You're my best friend, after all."

She slowly slid her hand on top of my palm. The comfort I felt was pleasant and I didn't mind feeling it more. I gently closed my hand, clapping Kikyou's in return.

"Best friend, huh?" I muttered under my breath.

"Yes... Best friend..." Kikyou's breathing became slightly disordered as she leaned in to embrace me. "You're my best friend, Kiyotaka-kun... Just my best friend... Nothing more..."

A familiar feeling-- her softness, her warmth. I caressed Kikyou's head with my other hand. The conflict inside her heart was obvious, even to me. As a "best friend", she can be as close to me as she wanted without any consequences... regardless of whether we could be more.

I was her solace, and she was mine.

"Kikyou... Things will get harder from now on."

"Hm? What's that all of a sudden? Of course, things will be harder. You're not our leader anymore," she responded, keeping her face buried in my chest. I might reek of sweat, so seeing her like this makes me a bit nervous.

"I'm not talking about our class. I'm talking about you. Since you're a core part of the class, our enemies might set their sights on you."

"I already knew that... but I'm not too scared. Besides, I'm pretty good with making others have a favorable impression of me."

"I don't doubt your capabilities, but people like Ryuen or Sakayanagi-- they're not like other students."

"Yes... I can already see that." I felt her grip on my shirt tighten. "Will you... protect me, Kiyotaka-kun?"

As the person who solicited her trust, Kikyou saw me as a pillar of support. However, she's more than capable of protecting herself. She isn't a parasite like Karuizawa who needed a host to latch onto. Unfortunately, she can only go so far. Kikyou recognizes that some enemies might be more than she can handle.

Dread. It was a feeling that Kikyou wasn't used to. She always thought she could handle anyone and anything. Defeat wasn't a possibility. But of course, the one who introduced that possibility to her was none other than me. The hopelessness she felt back when we were *'enemies'*... She didn't want to feel that again.

With swords sharper than her armor can take pointed at her, Kikyou needed a shield. That will be my role-- at least for now.

"Yeah, I'll protect you."

Vol. 5: Chapter 15.3 - Make Things Clear

"Do you like my hair that much?" Kikyou asked with a smirk.

I've been either patting or caressing her hair the entire time. As we leaned on each other, the two of us decided to spend the last remaining minutes inside the clubroom before going back to the field.

"Well, it's really soft. I like the way it feels."

"Does every girl hear that from you? Even with your monotone way of speaking, you'll still be branded as a flirt if you say those kinds of words."

"That's why I only say them to you," I replied.

"Wha-?!" Kikyou blushed, but she didn't back down. "So... not even Airi-chan and Haruka-chan get to hear them?"

They're on a first-name basis now, huh? I also remember Haruka calling her Kyou-chan. It's nice to see them getting close. Though, it should be really easy with Kikyou's outgoing personality. She meshes well with Haruka, and they could help Airi open up even faster.

"Yeah. Only you."

"Hehh... Hmph, at least you're aware that you're *actually* flirting with me," she shrugged.

This should be the part where I either deny her words or say that it wasn't my intention.

"Hmm... Yeah, I guess you can call it flirting."

"E-Eh, you actually admitted it?" She looked at me, surprised and confused. "Um, that's good but..."

I would usually deny everything as part of our usual script, so she didn't expect me to own up to it.

"Are you weirded out that I'm flirting with you?" I asked.

Well, I already knew the answer to that question. It was only reinforced by the fact that Kikyou subconsciously strengthened her grasp on my hand instead of letting it go.

"No... I mean, we've been flirting with each other for who knows how long since the first semester..." Kikyou donned a serious expression as she turned to ask me. "But why call it out now?"

That's a very self-aware question.

"Just felt like it," I replied.

"You cheeky little..." Kikyou saw my response as an opportunity

to draw out my true feelings through further teasing. "Hehh~? Maybe you're starting to fall for me? Like, for real this time? That's no good, Kiyotaka-kun. I'm everyone's Kikyou-chan, you know?"

"Not really, but it's a refreshing experience. I know you're everyone's Kikyou-chan, so I'm only flirting with you whenever we're alone."

Hearing that, Kikyou's smile turned melancholic. Our relationship was stuck. Given how close we are, our friendship would never regress. But because of the circumstances, it could also never move forward. My wish was to live in obscurity and her wish was to be loved by everyone. If we dive in and become more than what we are now, maintaining the status quo that would make our wishes come true becomes impossible. One small mistake and this comfort zone-- this little bubble world of ours, would crumble to dust, and we'll be forced to face the chaotic outside world.

"Whenever we're alone, huh...?" Kikyou's hands started to tremble ever so slightly. "Say Kiyotaka-kun..."

She leaned in and touched my cheek. I looked at her as our faces slowly drew closer to each other.

"Since we're alone, is it fine if we do something... sillier?"

I saw the reflection of my own face in Kikyou's moist eyes. Her lips were glistening and her cheeks were flushed pink. Kikyou's vision seemed cloudy as she fully submitted herself to the mood. I was honestly unsure of what I'm supposed to do, and in the end, I decided to let things take their course. After all...

"Yo, Ayanokouji-kun~! How's the cool air in Yua's clubroom?!" Iida-senpai opened the sliding door without any hesitation.

Kikyou instantly jerked up and turned away from me. I faced Iida-senpai whose smile went stiff as a mannequin. Following her, a blond-haired girl entered the room with an apologetic expression.

"Oh my... It seems like we came at the worst time, Aoi."

"U-Uhh... H-Hey there, Ayanokouji-kun... and Kikyou-chan!" In a panic, Iida-senpai decided to ignore what she just saw and greeted us.

And of course, Kikyou gladly accepted her invitation to sweep things under the rug.

"Iida-senpai and Konishi-senpai! Good afternoon!" She stood up with a big smile and welcomed them. "Sorry for barging in. The room was really nice and relaxing, so I decided to stay for a while."

Kikyou's cheeks were still tinged with a small blush. Konishi-senpai chuckled before giving her an understanding smile.

"You can come in anytime, Kikyou-chan."

Konishi-senpai smiled at me and raised an eyebrow. She wants me to stand on stage. Will I choose to continue the two's facade, or

will I face the current situation at hand?

Alright, I'll oblige. I'm not fond of misunderstandings, anyway. I stood up and stretched for a quick second.

"Good afternoon, Konishi-senpai, Iida-senpai. Thanks for letting me use the room."

"It's no problem, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm sure you've been working hard for your class. And besides, I thought I'd help a fellow Red Team member rest," she replied with a gentle smile. "We'll be gone shortly. Aoi and I just went to get some teacups as an errand for a teacher."

I approached Iida-senpai and stood beside Kikyou.

"It would be bad if Iida-senpai and Konishi-senpai get the wrong idea. Why don't we come clean and clear things up, Kikyou?"

"Eh...? Erm, well... I guess so..." Kikyou fidgeted her fingers together, looking bashful.

"S-S-So you two... were dating after all?!" yelled the perplexed Iida-senpai.

Author's Notes:

Kiyotaka never bothered calling Nagumo, Kiriya, Fuuka, or any other senior with the "senpai" honorific in his monologues. Konishi Yua and Iida Aoi were the only exceptions due to them acting as actual senpai(s) to him. The way they act lines up with his image of how a senpai would act in a normal "Senpai-Kouhai" relationship. Thus, he treats them as such while acting like a respectful (but cheeky) kouhai in return.

Kiyotaka never had the chance to interact normally with any senior in the canon, apart from Manabu after his graduation. He was always forced to don his White Room persona because he saw them as potential enemies instead of regular seniors. That wasn't the case for Konishi and Iida who had the same philosophy of living a perfectly normal and fun high school life despite the school's system.

Vol. 5: Chapter 15.4 - Before It's Too Late

"That's a very reasonable assumption, Senpai... but it's just a misunderstanding," I said.

"Y-Yes... Kiyotaka-kun and I aren't dating or anything. We were just caught up in the moment... Or more like, *I* was caught up in the moment."

Kikyou flawlessly kept up her "Angel Act: Bashful Mode".

"Hehh... The two of you would've ended up kissing if I didn't go in, though..." Iida-senpai looked unconvinced.

"Kikyou was just teasing me. It was practically a game of chicken."

"Ahh, how embarrassing..." She shook her head from side to side while covering her face.

"Have you ever kissed someone, Kikyou-chan?" Konishi-senpai suddenly asked.

"Eh? Err, no..."

"Then, did you have a boyfriend in the past?"

"K-Konishi-senpai, why are you asking this, all of a sudden...?"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to ask very personal questions out of nowhere. I just didn't think you'd be the type of girl who would kiss someone so easily."

"O-Of course not!" protested Kikyou. "I wouldn't do that with just any other guy, you know...? And Kiyotaka-kun isn't just any other guy to me..."

She walked towards the cupboard and continued talking without looking at us.

"So Ayanokouji-kun is special to you. Do you like him then? Romantically speaking," she asked.

"Yua... The person in question is right beside Kikyou-chan, you know?" Iida-senpai muttered with a pained smile.

"I..." Kikyou bit her lips as she looked down. "I don't know... Kiyotaka-kun is my best friend, so I don't really know how to answer that question... A-And... it's very embarrassing!"

Iida-senpai jumped in front of us, trying to shift the weird atmosphere.

"S-Sorry, Kikyou-chan, Ayanokouji-kun! I hope we won't make things awkward for the two of you!"

"No, no, it's okay, Iida-senpai..." said Kikyou. "I just didn't expect

Konishi-senpai to be, uh... assertive... when it comes to romance."

Konishi-senpai was busy getting the teacups, but her hands briefly stopped moving as Kikyou spoke. She must've realized how uncomfortable we were.

"Sorry about that, you two. I must've dampened the mood." She chuckled before turning to us with a guilty smile. "It was none of my business, but I started asking questions like I'm some sort of couples' counselor. That was insensitive and intrusive of me."

Her questions lacked delicacy. It was the polar opposite of her usual considerate self.

"May I ask what spurred that on, Senpai? I doubt it came out of nowhere."

"Ayanokouji-kun..." Iida-senpai looked at me with weary eyes.

"I'm... just not a fan of that kind of stuff, you know?" she answered with a tender and calm tone. "When someone holds their feelings inside because of some unnecessary misunderstanding, you know that it's just a car crash waiting to happen."

How fascinating. I never expected her to be so pessimistic.

"I-I'm sorry. My actions must've looked immature and childish..." Kikyou bowed.

"T-That's not it, Kikyou-chan! I'm not trying to say that at all. It's completely normal to be embarrassed." Konishi-senpai hurriedly denied Kikyou's words before her voice softened. "The thing I was worried about was a sad future where... everything's too late..."

"Yua..."

"B-But that's under the notion that you actually like Ayanokouji-kun that way, of course! As I've said earlier, I got ahead of myself and just assumed stuff. That's why I'm apologizing. I didn't mean to be nosy."

"You don't believe that things will turn out just fine?" I asked.

"Well... This is real life, Ayanokouji-kun. Everything might turn out fine in things like light novels or manga, but it's different out here," she replied, looking pensive.

I could hear the same gentle voice, but it also felt like I was talking to a completely different person. Iida-senpai and Kikyou started to look worried.

"I... would have to agree, especially in *this* school."

Her pupils trembled slightly, but I was the only one who noticed--no. Iida-senpai noticed it too. Of course, she would.

"In this school where you can be expelled out of nowhere, we don't have the luxury to act like characters in a rom-com. Misunderstandings, roundabout conversations-- we don't have time for those things... because once we get expelled, it'll be too late for everyone involved, as you've said. You didn't want us to have any

regrets."

Konishi-senpai realized that she'd lost her cool, so she closed her eyes and gently breathed out.

"Now I see why Horikita-kun is so interested in you," she smiled.

She decided to run away, but I won't come after her. After all, it's really none of my business. This much should be enough.

"It's just a stupid rambling of a person with a wild imagination. Please don't mind it," I shrugged.

She carefully put the teacups inside a small cardboard box.

"I'm sorry about earlier, Kikyouno-chan. I shouldn't have said all of that."

"Senpai..."

She gave us her usual serene smile before heading out with a slightly nervous Iida-senpai in tow.

After the two of them disappeared, Kikyouno's mask finally fell off.

"What the heck was that all about...?" she asked.

"She must've been worried about us."

"Worried?! She just assumed what I felt and tried to make me confess outright! Like, get the hell off my case!"

"You managed to slip past her with your acting, at least."

"Ugh... It kinda pisses me off... I didn't expect Konishi-senpai, of all people, to speak like that..."

"Any guesses as to why?"

"Who knows? She was so tactless and arrogant just because she's older than us-- treating us like kids!" Kikyouno ranted. "But... Konishi-senpai *did* say that she didn't mean it like that."

So Kikyouno doesn't know about *him*.

"I guess she was concerned about students who take things too slowly. I mean, if one of us suddenly gets expelled, then you won't get the chance to confess your feelings for me, right?"

"Oi, why are you assuming that *I'm* gonna confess? Don't get carried away now, *best friend*." She looked at me with a sickened expression.

"Well, it's your own fault for suddenly trying to kiss me. I doubt a normal *best friend* would do that." I bit back without missing a beat.

"O-Oh, shut up, will you? I... just got carried away by the mood! Any girl might've done the same if they were being gently held like that in your arms!" She continued her rant with a red face.

I don't even know if that was part of the rant. Even I'm starting to get embarrassed here...

Fortunately, we were saved by the sound of the bell. I'm sure the two of us didn't want to continue the conversation as it was, so we swiftly ran out of the room to meet up with the others.

Vol. 5: Chapter 16.1 - Growth and Regression

As Horikita slowly dragged herself to the infirmary with Azuma, Ichihashi, and Nishimura, a couple of unexpected people crossed paths with them. Horikita froze up, and the three immediately noticed.

One of them stopped in their tracks to look at her, and the other followed. Even Horikita didn't expect this.

"Suzune."

"Nii-san..."

It was Horikita Manabu, her older brother. He instantly noticed the injury on her leg. After heaving a sigh, he spoke to his flustered little sister.

"Do you understand Class 1-A's situation right now?"

"Yes... I do."

"It seems like you're starting to feel the burdens of being a leader."

The three girls behind Horikita gave her a worried look.

"After *he* led us, everything... started to become clear," Horikita answered with a pained look. "My class has potential, but they're not realized just yet... That's why they-- we were called defects."

"Hm, I see."

Her older brother looked down and gave her an almost imperceptible smile. However, it only took a second before he looked over with his customary sharp stare.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka..." he muttered softly, careful so that no one other than them could hear his name. "Now that he'd stepped down, you're just Class A on paper. Without him, you're simply back from where you've started."

Horikita knew that her older brother was probing her for an answer-- a show of her resolve. She steeled herself and looked straight into his eyes.

"That... may be right. But I don't think that's entirely true, either. I don't think... we're the same as we were back then. It may not be true for every single one of us, but most of my classmates were inspired by him. We're trying our best to maintain the position that's been granted to us."

Her older brother walked away without any parting words as Tachibana followed him with a vacant expression. That said, Horikita understood the meaning of Manabu's soft sigh right before he left.

"*That's not enough*," he must've been thinking.

"Horikita-san..." Nishimura called out to her with a concerned voice.

"It's okay. Let's go."

The girls chose to stay silent. Now wasn't the time to pry, but they'd also made their decision. They wanted to be of help to their leader, so they'll try and get to know her, and hopefully... become friends, even.

"Your condition won't get worse, but it won't get better either, at least for today. Participating in any more events would be difficult," said the nurse.

"Thank you, Sensei."

Horikita could've stayed rested inside one of the tents in the field, but she didn't want to stand out. After she got herself checked, Minami Hakuo, their classmate, rushed to the infirmary to find them.

"H-Horikita-san, I found you!"

"Minami-kun?" called the surprised Ichihashi.

"Is everything okay?" Horikita asked.

"There's trouble! It's Sudou!"

Minami, Azuma, and Ichihashi, hurried back to where everything went down. Horikita couldn't follow them back due to her injury, but she gave them some advice before the others went off, leaving her and Nishimura inside the infirmary.

"I expected them to pull something like this but..." said Horikita, who had a grim expression.

"If this blows out of proportion, Sudou-kun's participation will be the least of our worries..." added Nishimura.

Earlier...

"Ergh-"

"Airi-?!"

Sakura stumbled as they tried to walk out of the field. However, it wasn't due to her carelessness.

"U-Ugh..." She tried her best to endure the pain as she did minutes ago, but walking had become unbearable to her.

Seeing her friend struggle to stand up, Hasebe slightly lifted the ends of Sakura's jogging pants and saw her swelling ankle. Miyake and Sudou instantly took notice and approached them.

"Airi... You're leg-!"

"What the-?"

"You sprained your leg, Airi?"

"Y-Yes... Seems like it..."

Hasebe took Airi's right arm to support her back up. Miyake's eyes turned sharp as he knelt down to her eye level.

"The swelling is pretty severe. This couldn't have been just now. Tell me, Airi. This happened during the 200-meter run, didn't it?"

Feeling Miyake's suspicion, Sakura knew that lying her way out was futile.

"Um... Yes..." she answered, looking away.

Sudou walked up to her and Hasebe with a serious expression.

"I'll take Airi to one of the tents. They need to check her immediately," he said.

"Eh-? Uh, alright..." Hasebe, who was supporting Sakura with her shoulder, switched with Sudou. She knew he was stronger, but wondered why he couldn't have just taken Sakura's other arm so they can support her together.

"H-Hyah-?!"

That's when she finally understood what he wanted to do. Sudou took Sakura's shoulder before lifting her whole body right after, giving her a princess carry.

"Ahh, I see," she nodded.

Surely, carrying the patient would be much faster. Some girls squealed excitement after seeing them, while some boys curiously looked over which caused Sakura to turn red in embarrassment. However, she didn't tell him to let her down.

The four of them stayed inside the tent. After the medical personnel prohibited Sakura's future participation, her friends continued with the questions.

"Well, it's a good thing that you're only participating in the Scavenger Hunt, at least. We'll talk to Hirata-kun about finding a substitute for you," said Hasebe.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize, Airi. I'm sure it'll be fine," she reassured.

"Yeah, I'm sure they'll take care of it. But now that that's out of the way, can you tell us what really happened, Airi?" Miyake got straight to the point. "This wasn't just a careless mistake, was it? You've wouldn't have tried to hide your injury from us."

"Is it someone from Class B... or Class D?" Sudou asked, looking grim.

"Um, p-please. It was an accident!" Sakura tried to defuse the situation.

"During your run, we were focused on Haruka because of her

close competition in the top four. However, we still saw you finish the race. You were really behind, but we initially thought it was because you were tired... Now it makes sense."

"Who was it, Airi? Do you know their name?" Sudou's calm tone didn't scare Sakura, but it made her more nervous.

"I... don't want any trouble..." Sakura grew stressed about the situation. She knew her friends will try to confront the other party.

"We won't cause any trouble, Airi. We'll talk to them after the sports festival," said Miyake.

"I want to know, too, Airi. It's not about getting in trouble. If this was intentional, then they should at least take responsibility," followed Hasebe.

Hearing her friends' reassurance, Sakura finally mustered up the courage to speak.

"T-The one who made contact with me was... Manabe-san..."

Hasebe's face turned dark. Sakura knew her name, and Hasebe also seemed to know about her. This piqued Miyake's curiosity, but he knew this wasn't the right time.

"How did it happen, exactly?"

"Um... When we were at the turning point, she and the other Class D girl stuck close to my lane, I think. I was trying to win so I got a little bit closer to Manabe-san's lane on the left to get to the finish line faster... That's when we made a little bit of contact..."

They knew Sakura wasn't the type of girl who would lie. The fact that the Class D girls managed to raise some suspicion from Sakura herself in the middle of their run says a lot about how obvious their intentions were.

"So it wasn't an accident, after all..."

"At this point, it's pretty obvious that Ryuuken's class is trying to sabotage us with injuries."

"Horikita was the same with that Kinoshita girl, remember? The two of them fell down together," said Miyake. "Airi is a lot slower than Horikita, so there wasn't enough momentum for a huge fall without Manabe making things obvious to the cameras. But in the end, I guess she still made Airi twist her ankle."

"Um, everyone. Again... I-I don't want any trouble. And the All-Participant Events are done, anyway. I can just rest up and heal. I don't want our class to be inconvenienced by my absence, so I'll pay for the substitution myself.."

"That's not what this is about, Airi. I could hardly care about what this does to the class. It's a losin' battle, anyway. What I can't stand is the fact that they *hurt* my friend." Sudou's expression finally started to show signs of anger.

"Ken-kun, please don't! Ugh-!" Sakura tried to reach her hand out

to Sudou before suddenly looking like she was in pain.

The two boys looked worried. Hasebe immediately got up and approached her.

"H-Haruka-chan-?!"

She slightly lifted Airi's shirt which revealed a reddish mark on the lower right side of her body.

"I knew it... Why did you hide this, too?"

"What do you mean, Haruka?"

"We had a pretty rough time during the Cavalry Battle, as well. I thought Airi had a bad fall, but she denied it, saying she was okay..."

"And the team that attacked you was from Class B, right?"

"Yeah, but the problem wasn't really about that. Two Class D horsemen were near us, but none of them bothered helping us. One of them wasn't even against anyone."

"They clearly targeted Airi!" Sudou couldn't hold his rage any longer and bolted out of the tent.

"Ken-kun!" Sakura called out to her, but he didn't come back.

"I'll go after him. Haruka, please stay with Airi." Miyake followed him without waiting for a response.

"U-Uh, okay!"

"Akito-kun!"

"And they're gone..."

Only a couple of minutes passed since Sudou and Miyake left, but it felt like forever for Hasebe and Sakura. They could only pray in silence that those two would come back soon.

"This... is bad..." Something finally clicked inside Hasebe's mind.

"Haruka-chan...?"

"Miyachhi must stop Kencchin from doing anything rash... This was their plan from the start!"

"You mean..."

"Yeah... They must've targeted you so they can provoke Ken... Horikita-san and Ken are key players in our class. It only makes sense for the enemy to try and remove them. I never expected them to go after *you* just for that, though..."

"K-Kiyotaka-kun... This also happened to Kiyotaka-kun, right? He was injured while being in contact with a student from Class B..."

"Mn, you're right... If Ryuen wasn't bluffing and he really did work with Sakayanagi-san, then I guess that's a reasonable connection."

"Ken, stop it! Stop for a second!"

Miyake tried to chase Sudou who was planning to give Ryuen a piece of his mind.

"Don't even try, Akito! They've gone too far!" he yelled.

Being out in the open, the two of them garnered some attention.

"And what? You'll try to solve it with violence?"

"Shut up!" Ken's eyes turned bloodshot as he glared at Ryuuen who was sitting around in the bleachers area.

"Hey, Ryuuen! Come here, you bastard!"

Minami (Hakuo) immediately sensed the brewing trouble and made a run for it to look for Horikita.

Ryuuen smirked, seemingly amused by Sudou's approach.

"Why would a gorilla suddenly call out to me?"

"You guys targeted Airi as well, didn't you?!"

Ryuuen stood up and confidently walked towards Sudou. At that moment, Miyake noticed a student from Class D arriving at the place with Sakagami-sensei.

"What's this now? We're on the same team, you know? It'll do us no good if you keep blaming your incompetence on others." Ryuuen's smile widened.

"Ken, don't listen to him!"

Miyake's plea was futile. It seemed like Sudou couldn't even hear him anymore.

"Your leader is incompetent, that's why she's injured. Ayanokouji is injured too, but at least he can still move around. And now your friend is out on the count... I don't know, Sudou. It seems like this Airi friend of yours is just like you-- another useless defect."

After hearing Ryuuen's insulting words, something inside Sudou snapped.

Author's Notes:

All Manabu wanted was for Suzune to tread her own path. After all, he knew that Suzune stopped being herself when she started emulating him. She was simply following her brother's path, not her own. Manabu knew that if Suzune kept chasing after his back, her growth will be hindered.

Due to Kiyotaka's show of friendship and leadership, Suzune developed a form of admiration for his mentor-like attitude towards her, as we've seen in the past five volumes. This caused her to self-reflect and progress much earlier toward her character development in Volume 11.5. But of course, it's not yet fully complete.

Manabu's smile in this chapter indicates how he'd noticed this growth, similar to how he smiled and embraced Suzune when they said their

goodbyes. *Unlike before, Suzune wasn't trying to walk alone. She considers her classmates as allies.*

Vol. 5: Chapter 16.2 - What Could Be Done

Everything seemed slow and silent. The sight of Sudou pulling back his arms for a punch tightened the hearts of those watching. Students from Class 1-A ran up to them, but they were too far away. In a blink of an eye, the second-long incident happened.

Thud

"Miyake-kun!"

"Miyake!"

The voice of his classmates rang inside Sudou's ears as the sight in front of him became clear. Miyake shoved the smiling Ryuen away and took the punch instead.

"Oh, Miyake. Why did you have to ruin the fun?" asked Ryuen.

"Shut the hell up, Ryuen..."

"Miyake-kun, are you alright?!" Hirata rushed to check on him, but his help was gently rejected.

"I'll be alright, Hirata... You can stay out of this. I'll... handle it."

The strength of Sudou's punch wasn't a joke. Miyake tried his best to hold on, but his head got really shaken from the impact. He could barely stand while staying conscious.

"Akito...?"

Sudou's head suddenly became lucid. His rage dissipated the moment he saw the injured face of his friend.

"What is going on here?" Sakagami-sensei briskly walked toward the commotion.

"Well, well, well. You came at the right time, Sakagami-sensei."

"I've heard from Nomura-kun that you were looking for me, Ryuen."

"Ahh, right!" he replied, before giving Miyake and Sudou a side glance. "But that can wait for later. We have more important things at hand. Isn't that right, Miyake?"

He seemed a little dubious about Ryuen's way of talking, but he also knew that he was right.

"I guess so." Sakagami-sensei inched forward in front of the two Class A boys in question. "What is this about, Miyake-kun, Sudou-kun? You know that violence is strictly prohibited, correct?"

"Sakagami-sensei-" Hirata tried to say something, but he stopped.

He'll let Miyake do the talking and only provide support when needed.

"Ken... wasn't being violent, Sakagami-sensei... He just... hit me by accident."

Miyake's words earned some gasps from the confused spectators. He was bold enough to say an obvious lie to protect his classmate. Sudou clicked his tongue with a pained look.

"I clearly saw what happened."

"Nothing happened, Sensei..." Miyake's response was paired with a sharp glare.

"Sudou-kun may have hit *you* on accident, but it's also a fact that he was intent on hitting and harming someone." Sakagami gave Ryuuken a side-eye.

"But he wasn't hit, right...? So... there's no need for you to take action..."

"Miyake-kun, I understand that you don't want your friend or your class to be in trouble, but there were a lot of witnesses. What happened here cannot be denied."

His vision was getting blurry and his legs were starting to give out, but Miyake mustered up all of his remaining strength to give a final reply.

"In... the narrative that you're trying to push, *I* would be identified as the victim... My words hold more weight... So I'll keep pushing the fact that it was just... an accident. Ken did nothing wrong."

Sakagami-sensei's eyes narrowed looking at Miyake's condition. His cheek was red and will obviously start swelling. And his gums were clearly torn up as seen from the blood flowing from his mouth.

"Alright. Nothing happened here. We'll leave it at that..." Sakagami-sensei sighed before giving him a warning. "However, are you alright with enabling this kind of behavior? You're his friend, aren't you?"

"Y-You don't have to worry about that, S-Sensei," Miyake's footing was collapsing, so he grabbed Sudou's shoulder and used it as support. "I wouldn't have covered for this idiot if he didn't look remorseful..."

The ones who heard him turned to Sudou and saw his guilty and frustrated expression.

"I will not turn a blind eye if this happens again, understood?"

"Y-Yes..."

The sudden surge of relief nearly made Miyake's legs give out. Fortunately, he didn't pass out.

His plan didn't work, but Ryuuken shrugged as if it was nothing

but a minor inconvenience. Of course, he had the grounds to think so considering how behind Class A was compared to them. The success of this plan was just the icing on the cake.

"Miyake-kun! Sudou-kun!"

Azuma and the others finally arrived, but the situation had already been dealt with. They could only heave mixed sighs of exhaustion and relief.

"Horikita-san sent us," said Minami.

"I-I see... Maezono... Hirata... C-Can you fill them in on what happened...?"

After that, Sudou supported Miyake as they walked back to one of the tents.

"You would've been... in so much hot water if it weren't for me, you idiot gorilla..." Miyake scolded him while in pain.

"Yeah..." Sudou didn't even bother retaliating. He could only agree with a serious face. "They totally got in my head. It was that bastard's plan from the start."

Looking at Miyake's condition, it didn't seem like he'd be allowed to participate in the Four-Way Tug of War.

"I messed up big time earlier... I'll be sure to apologize to you and everyone later. But still... There's no way I could forgive them for injuring Airi," he said.

Miyake felt the same. He could only smile after hearing Sudou's words.

"You really love Airi, don't you?"

"Huh? The hell are you saying, dumbass? Did you hit your head or something?"

"*You're* the one who hit my head, asshole."

"Shut up," Sudou chuckled. "Well, I guess you're right. I don't think love is the word for it, but Airi is important to me. I feel the same for everyone in the group."

"Yeah, I know... I'm sure we're all on the same boat."

Their journey back to where Sakura and Hasebe were didn't take long. Or at least, it didn't *feel* long for the two of them.

"Akito-kun, Ken-kun! You're back!" Sakura happily greeted them as they went inside the tent.

"Is everything okay-?" Hasebe asked.

"We managed... somehow..." said the weakened Miyake.

"Haruka, we might need some help..."

"Miyacchi-?!"

Hasebe rushed towards them in a panic as soon as she saw Miyake's condition. Sakura looked very worried, too. Sudou told them everything that happened while the medical personnel they called in checked on Miyake.

"I see... So it was his plan, after all."

"Sorry... I didn't know what I was thinkin'..."

"I'll accept your apology if you let me punch you in the face later," Miyake shrugged. "But for now, what are we going to do about the festival?"

"I don't think we can do anythin'. I can still get MVP, but class battles look bleak. I can't even blame it on how bad our classmates are. Horikita made the best possible roster for us. Even I can see that..." said Sudou.

"But we can't win if the match-ups are rigged..." muttered Sakura.

"They even went so far as to try and injure our players..." Hasebe silently bit her lip as she thought. "What would Kiyopon do in this situation...?"

Author's Notes:

The difference between canon Sudou and Alter Sudou would be his friends, but that's not really the reason per se. It's more accurate to say that it's what his friends brought to him. In Volume 5, he admitted his motives to Horikita. Sudou wanted to show off-- he wanted recognition. He never felt this way in the canon given his reputation both inside and outside the class. His early and shallow friendship with Ike and Yamauchi didn't help, either.

Meanwhile, he already got this early on in Alter. He was first recognized by Ayanokouji when he visited him during his club activities. His reputation inside their classroom was also relatively good. However, most of this recognition and friendship was given to him by the other members of the Ayanokouji Group, especially Miyake.

As a result, while he's still hyped and excited about the sports festival, Sudou wasn't too hung up on getting to show off. He didn't have that desperate need anymore.

Upside: His outburst wasn't as bad in the canon.

Downside: He can't be Horikita's tool.

Vol. 5: Chapter 17.1 - Pawn

Kikyou and I got back for the second half of the event along with Ryuuko. After we said goodbye, they went on to meet with their friends. I, then, found Hirata with Yukimura and Matsushita. Trouble seems to have been averted, but some damage was still done.

"We're substituting Sakura-san for the Scavenger hunt... Horikita-san will be absent for the rest of the competitions, too..."

"Class A is too behind... but on the bright side, Red Team is winning the overall competition."

They were discussing the current state of the sports festival, and it seemed like things wouldn't get any better.

"Ayanokouji-kun!"

Matsushita was the first one to notice me. She looked relieved, but her smile didn't last long,

"How's the situation?" I asked.

"It doesn't seem like there's a good solution for everything," answered Hirata.

"Ayanokouji, we need your help. If anyone can get us out of this situation, it'd be you." Yukimura stepped forward and faced me.

"I can't do anything. Based on what I've heard from Kikyou and the others, there's no chance for us to overtake any class at this point."

"Is that... really the case?"

Yukimura had a pained expression after hearing my honest evaluation.

"Yeah..." I shrugged. "And also, I want to make another thing clear. Even if a solution did exist, I wouldn't bother trying to find out what that is. Well, unless I want to."

"What?" He turned to me, his eyes narrowed.

"I'm no longer the leader. I'm done with stuff like that. We've talked about this before, remember?"

"But you're still part of the class, right? You should contribute."

"I don't mean to be rude, Yukimura-kun, but I don't think you're in any position to say that to Ayanokouji-kun."

Matsushita's words made him stop. He looked down in frustration, but after a brief moment of silence, Yukimura finally continued speaking in a more collected tone.

"I know what you mean, but I'm doing my best on every front as much as possible, even in sports where I'm basically dead weight. I totally respect Ayanokouji's contribution right now-- excelling both in academics and sports, but he can do so much more, right?"

"If you're talking about thinking up strategies and decisions like how we're doing right now, then wouldn't Ayanokouji-kun's decision to step down amount to nothing?"

Yukimura's question was most likely rooted in my own lack of transparency. He was smart, so I expected someone like him to make a statement regarding my position sometime in the future. I admit that my motivations for stepping down were glazed with half-truths, but...

"Can you get real with me for a second, Ayanokouji? If I'm wrong, I'll bow my head and apologize, but I don't think someone as smart and level-headed as you would succumb to pressure this early into the year. Coming up with strategies to beat the other classes, making defensive measures to protect our classmates-- You can still do all of that even though you're not our leader anymore, can't you?"

"Do all of that, huh?" I sighed. "You're right, Yukimura. I stepped down from my previous position precisely because I didn't want to *'do all of that'* anymore. That's all."

"So it's the truth, after all. It's not the duress or the mental burden of being the leader that made you step down. You just... didn't want to take on the responsibility anymore." Rather than looking upset, Yukimura's expression was that of relief.

"Yukimura-kun..." muttered Hirata.

"Sorry about that, Ayanokouji. Please forget everything I said. As Matsushita had said, I'm not in any place to tell you what to do," he said before facing Hirata. "I'll consult our other classmates about the situation."

"Alright," Hirata nodded.

Matsushita sighed as he walked away.

"I'm glad he calmed down..."

"Yukimura has a point, though. It's not like I don't have the ability to help you guys. I'm just choosing not to."

"Hirata-kun and I already knew that. And I'm sure it's the same for Kushida-san and Horikita-san. You have your own reasons, and all of us chose to respect your choice as thanks for everything you've done for the class, and of course, as your friends. At least, that's how it is for me. As for our other classmates... Well, they're better off believing your *'official statement'*."

"I think it's fine for you to live your high school life however you want, Ayanokouji-kun. That's what most of us are doing, anyway."

Hirata turned to follow Yukimura. They rearranged our roster for the Recommended Participant events. Airi was out of the Scavenger Hunt while Akito was out of the Four-Way Tug of War. Horikita won't be able to participate in the Three-Legged Race and the Relay Race either. These absences were all caused by injuries. Saying we're in a pinch was an understatement. There's no way we can win against the other three classes. All we can do now is earn as many points as we can to help the Red Team stay in the lead.

"Ohhh!"

"Wow!"

A bit of a commotion ensued after Shinohara, Airi's substitute, grabbed Ike by the wrist to the finish line.

"We have our first contestant, from Class 1-A! Let's see what they got..." The energetic teacher opened the slip of paper and read the contents. "A *Funny Guy*! How interesting!"

"Shinohara tried her best to look unperturbed, but she was probably just as embarrassed as Ike, who looked like he was about to throw a tantrum."

The others placed well, too, so it was a great round for our class. In the Four-Way Tug of War, our class made a grueling effort to place third. We couldn't beat Class C and D, and we were nearly overwhelmed by Class B. We definitely felt Akito's absence.

"Go, Sudou!"

"You can do it, Kayano-chan!"

It was then time for the Three-Legged Race. Horikita and I were supposed to be the ones participating, but she got injured.

"I'm glad we have a backup roster..." muttered Matsushita.

"Yeah... Horikita-san was ready even for something like this," said Maezono.

That said, Horikita already foresaw these potential scenarios. She had Sudou and Onodera practice as backups. In the end, they placed first by a dangerously close margin. The pairs from the other classes did really well, too.

"Maezono-san, Ayanokouji-kun, let's get ready." Hirata called us for the final relay.

"Good luck to the two of you." Matsushita waved at us.

Because of Horikita's absence, a slot opened for one of the girls to become her replacement. Matsushita was supposed to be our go-to substitute, but she gave the position up for Maezono, claiming that she was tired. Maezono, who was only slightly behind Matsushita in speed, didn't mind pitching in.

"Good luck out there, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Good luck!"

"Break a leg, Ayanokouji!"

"Bring home the win for us!"

Despite our current situation, Class A still managed to stay cheery. The fact that the Red Team was still in the lead probably helped a lot. Our win was pretty much solidified as long as the seniors didn't throw this last event. Even if Class 1-A lost this race, it wouldn't change the overall result. It's impossible for Sakayanagi's Class 1-B to overtake us if the White Team loses.

Well...

Earlier...

"Kiyotaka-kun, Kikyou-chan..."

"Hi there, Ryuuko-chan! Horikita-san, too." Kikyou waved.

"Ayanokouji-kun, Kushida-san... What are you doing here?" asked Horikita.

After anticipating everything that would happen, I decided to check on Horikita's condition with the goal of holding a very important discussion.

"Hey, Ryuuko. I'm glad you're getting along with Horikita."

"What's with that, Kiyotaka-kun? You're acting like Horikita-san's dad," she chuckled.

Hearing that made the girl in question glare daggers at me. I'll shut up now, so please stop doing that.

"Ryuuko-chan, I wanted to talk to you about something. Is now a good time?"

I asked her to get Ryuuko out of the room so Horikita and I could speak privately, but I still wondered what kind of talk they were going to have.

"Oh, sure." Ryuuko glanced toward me and Horikita before nodding.

She instantly read the signal and walked out of the infirmary with Kikyou.

"You can go back with them later, Nishimura-san. I'll be fine on my own now. Thank you for keeping me company."

"Hmm... I'm still concerned about leaving you alone, but I don't think I can skip out on the events just because I'm not going to participate..."

After the two of them were out of sight, Horikita gave me a vigilant look. Acting the fool in front of her is pointless now, but it's not a problem. I've got a good grasp of Horikita's perception of my abilities, so it'll be easy to gauge how much I can tell her. She's an important piece for the next phase of my plans, after all.

"I heard they tried to get rid of Ken," I started.

"Well, I wouldn't be amazed even if you suddenly said that you knew it was gonna happen," she replied.

"I *did* know."

"Is that so? I'm surprised you didn't bother trying to save him. Or did you also know that everything was going to turn out alright?"

"I'm not omniscient, you know? It's not like I can predict everything that's going to happen in the future."

Well, I honestly didn't know if Ken could get out of the situation unscathed, but I'm glad he did. That said, I'm pretty sure he got lucky. If our class wasn't so behind, I'm sure Sakayanagi and Ryuuen could remove him if they really wanted to. **(1)**

"Oh, really now? Alright then. Let's get to the point. You didn't come here for nothing, did you?"

"That's right. I want you to distract someone for me."

"Distract... is it? You're finally going to be upfront about using me as your pawn, huh?"

"Well, if you're gonna let me use you, this setup should be more convenient for the both of us."

Horikita smiled with a sharp glint in her eyes.

Author's Notes:

1. Kiyotaka didn't care if Sudou got suspended or expelled for violence since it wouldn't affect his plans.

Vol. 5: Chapter 17.2 - The Kind of Person You Are

"Can I make a guess, Ayanokouji-kun?"

After Horikita asked that question, my phone vibrated indicating that I'd received a text message.

"Sure, go ahead." I ignored it, answering Horikita instead.

"I've been thinking about it ever since Nii-san asked me to give you his contact..." She suddenly turned to me, looking upset. "And you never delivered on your promise back then. You said you'd tell me about your talk after you meet him."

"Oh, yeah. I did tell you that," I muttered.

I didn't really forget about that "*promise*". Telling Horikita just wasn't a necessary move back then, unlike now. Well, that just solidified who I think her guess will be.

"It's Nagumo Miyabi, isn't it? The person you want me to distract..."

I stayed silent, waiting for Horikita to justify her answer first.

"I've done some digging. And even if I didn't, it's easy to tell that he's going to be the next student council president. I only know one person who *can* take that position from him, but... I don't think it's possible."

Graduating is inevitable. Even if her brother can beat Nagumo, he's not going to be around next year.

"Well, that's beside the point. It's a claim without any strong evidence. I thought your meeting with my brother was connected to this and the future student council president, somehow."

It seemed like Horikita got the gist of the situation, but she couldn't organize a coherent answer just yet. Her instincts were as sharp as always, and I can't help but be impressed.

"Since you got it right, this will be easier to explain."

"I'm right...?" Horikita sounded expectant yet doubtful.

"Yeah, right on mark. If things keep going the way they are now, then he's the one I'll have to fight eventually."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just imagine what will happen if Ryuen was a model student who got elected as Student Council President."

Horikita's cheek twitched.

"That would be... annoying."

"Right? Based on what your brother had told me, it seems like Nagumo is a bit similar to him."

"I see... He did keep challenging Nii-san during exams and whatnot, even though they were in different grades. It seems like there's no one in the second-years who can compete with him," she said.

I don't think that's necessarily true... At least, that's the vibe I got from *her*.

"When your brother graduates, Nagumo would have no one to play with. It's only natural for him to target us, first-years, next."

"That makes sense, but why would I need to distract him from you?"

"It's your payment."

"My payment...?"

"The main reason why I came here was for you. Because of your injury, we lost our anchor for the relay. At the same time, you lost your chance to run against your brother."

Horikita's eyebrows furrowed in frustration.

"What are you suggesting?" she asked.

"I'll be your representative. I'll show him Horikita Suzune's resolve by challenging him as a fellow anchor."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"But... wouldn't leaving this to you become a show of weakness instead?"

"That's not how your brother will see it. He knows that I'll never agree to something like this if your resolve was shallow. The fact that I'm the one pitching this idea to you shows how much I respect your determination," I replied. "Or... are you going to tell me that you're not up for this?"

"Ayanokouji-kun..." The flustered Horikita regained her composure and gave me a serious response. "No, you're right. If anyone can challenge my brother on the field, it can only be you."

"It seems like we've reached a mutual understanding."

Horikita's hands crumpled the sheets as they curled into a fist.

"You're really something else, Ayanokouji-kun... I've been lost for a while now, thinking about how I can make up for my failures during this sports festival..." Before I knew it, Horikita started opening up to me. "I spoke my mind to Nii-san, but I know that was not enough. I wanted to show him my resolve through action, but I had no idea how I could possibly do that..."

And that's when I came to serve the solution on a silver platter.

"The whole school will take notice of me after this, with Nagumo being the most troublesome out of all of them." I took out my phone

and showed her the text message that I'd received. "He'll definitely hold this race against me."

I contacted Horikita Manabu before going here and asked him about Nagumo's plans for the sports festival. Being in different years, I didn't expect to get an insider response. However, he managed to give us the answer we were looking for.

(12:51) [...He did try to challenge me, but I never entertained him...]

If Horikita Manabu accepts my challenge, I will instantly find myself in the middle of Nagumo's crosshairs. And that's why I'll use his sister's name to help steer some attention away from myself.

Horikita was dumbstruck, but only for a brief moment.

"I understand," she said, bowing her head. "Please... Show my brother what Class A is made of."

"Leave it to me."

The discussion was over and it was finally time for me to go back.

"Can you answer one last question, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I stopped in my tracks and gave her a side-eye.

"You were once the leader of our class. Being noticed by the likes of Sakayanagi-san and Ryuen-kun was a necessary part of your jaunt to Class A... However, now that you'd stepped down, getting caught up in trouble should be the last thing you want. Why would you put yourself in the limelight once again? Even if I helped you distract Nagumo, the risk should still outweigh the gain... Why are you doing this...?" Her eyes trembled as they struggled to look straight into mine. "Please, don't make me think that I made a mistake."

I sighed before closing my eyes. After a second of silence, I looked at Horikita before replying.

"Even if I'm no longer the leader, I'm still a member of the class. It wouldn't hurt to help you out like this every once in a while. That said, I wouldn't really do something if it doesn't yield more benefit than harm."

"So... you'll get something out of this?"

"Of course. If I do this, I'd be able to repay a friend. You've been considerate of my position ever since I stepped down. I'm just trying to show some gratitude."

My other reason? Well, it's not something you should worry about, Horikita.

"Are you sure you're alright now, Maezono-san?"

"Yep. I'm ready to go. The pain's all gone."

"I understand. So this will be our final six-person line-up. Sudou-

kun will run first, followed by me, then Onodera-san. Our fourth runner will be Maezono-san followed by Kushida-san. Then finally, Ayanokouji-kun..."

The 1200-meter Relay was the final competition where all twelve classes compete for first place. Winning the whole race will be extremely difficult, but we didn't plan on losing either. The third-years started getting ready. We stood in our lane beside Class 3-A. Of course, Hirata and I already planned this beforehand. Like in the other racing competitions, we could choose any lane we wanted on a first-come-first-serve basis. With this, I can approach the president later without much trouble.

"Let's do this, everyone." Hirata tried to lift our team's morale for the last time.

"We'll do our best!" said Kikyō.

"I'll run as fast as I can," replied Maezono.

"Don't trip now, Maezono-san."

"I should be saying that to you, Onodera."

The onlookers were on the edge of their seats. Well, no, not really. But the students were hyped. That said, most of the hype was coming from the second and third-years. After a quick scan, I managed to determine who the anchors were for the other classes.

Bang

Cheers ensued as the first runners bolted forward from their positions.

"Woah! Look at him go!"

"That first-year is fast as hell!"

When it comes to sports, Ken's nerves were as cool as steel. It didn't even take two seconds before he passed every other runner.

"Sudou's amazing!" Even Shibata, Class 1-C's anchor, had to praise him.

The two of them were head-to-head in terms of competing for First-Year MVP, but Ken's sudden burst of speed was still a sight to behold, even for him.

"Hirata, here!"

Ken gave us a solid advantage of around fifteen meters. After seeing him brush past everyone with a big lead, our classmates rejoiced. But of course, it was far from over. Hirata kept the lead as is, but that's about it. After his turn, Onodera, despite being the fastest girl in the class alongside Horikita, was passed by some senior guys.

"They're catching up..."

Our next runner, Maezono, wasn't slow by any means. That said, against the fastest runners of the senior classes, it was inevitable for her to come off short. Suddenly, we were in fifth place.

"I look forward to racing against you, President Horikita." Nagumo glanced at Horikita Manabu. "Our runners seem to be in close competition. Unless you defeat me and place first, Class 2-A will take the overall victory. It really is the dawn of a new era."

Ignoring his taunt, the president posed a question instead.

"Do you seriously plan to change this school?" he asked.

"You're too traditional. And even though you're strict, you're weak. Your rules are too generous, and they stop people from getting expelled. All I'm going to do is help make this school the embodiment of true meritocracy," answered Nagumo.

After the fifth runners set off, I got in position, right beside Horikita Manabu. Our eyes met, and I could tell that this man has his own fight.

"So you're the anchor," he said.

"This was supposed to be your sister's position," I replied.

"I see. I suppose she's struggling to make it through," he responded with vacant eyes.

Horikita probably dreamed of running alongside her brother, even for a moment. Even if a heartfelt conversation was out of reach, she might be able to convey her feelings through actions and simple words.

"It doesn't seem like you've given up, despite everything that's happened."

"You can thank your sister for that. Even if we got outsmarted by our enemies, she continued offering solutions, keeping everything in line-- keeping our heads high. She's changed a lot."

"I can tell..." I wished Horikita was here so she can see her brother's proud smile.

"Oh? If it isn't Suzune's boyfriend," Nagumo instantly joined in on our conversation as soon as he noticed us.

The president and I decided to ignore the fact that he was addressing her with such familiarity. Now that we've got his attention, it's finally time to get the ball rolling.

"Horikita asked me for a favor," I said. "Even if she got injured, she would like to show you how strong her resolve is."

Manabu's eyes narrowed, scrutinizing my intentions.

"Her resolve, huh?" He fixed his glasses before facing me. "If you're fully supporting Suzune, then I have no choice but to recognize it."

At that moment, Nagumo's smile finally disappeared.

"As her proxy, I would like to race against you seriously. However, you'll be forced to give up placing first."

Kikyou was running as fast as she could, but at best, she could only place sixth before passing the baton to me.

"Interesting..." After perceiving my underlying intentions, Horikita Manabu knew what he had to say. "Alright. Show me the kind of person, *my sister, Suzune*, is."

"Nagumo!" The runner from Class 2-A finally arrived.

"Horikita!" At almost the exact same time, the runner from Class 3-A passed the baton to the president.

The crowd suddenly became confused. Well, it was only natural after witnessing something inexplicable. Nagumo Miyabi and Horikita Manabu-- instead of running as fast as they could to convert their lead into a victory, the two of them stood completely and utterly still.

Vol. 5: Chapter 17.2.2 - Run as Fast as You Can

"You did well. Good work." Horikita Manabu received the baton, leaving their class's fifth runner in a state of shock and confusion.

"U-Uh... Hah... Thanks. Hah..." The guy panted as he walked out of the field.

"I'll join you in this farce, President Horikita."

Nagumo's tone was deep. His gloomy expression indicated that he wasn't amused by this development at all.

"You're free to do what you want, Nagumo."

Nagumo got into position, waiting for Kikyuu to pass the baton to me. In mere seconds, she'll be here.

"I'll say one thing to you before we race," I uttered, speaking to him in a way that only he can hear my voice.

"What is it?" he asked, as the two of us got ready.

"Run as fast as you can."

I saw him smile in the corner of my eye. As I focused on what was in front of me, I finally felt the baton touch my hands.

"Kiyotaka-kun!" Kikyuu cried.

And with that, I tear through the wind as I dashed down the track.

The cold winds of the fall season brushed past my cheeks as I sprinted with all my might. It felt completely different from the confined air of that sterile room. Ever since I got out of that place, I never had the chance to run seriously. That changed today.

The existence of the other runners almost seemed to have faded from my consciousness. I stopped caring about whether I'd passed them or not. Right now, the only thing that mattered was competing against the man next to me.

Eventually, I could no longer distinguish the things that I'm hearing. The cheers, the wind, the steps, or the cries of our fellow runners-- they all blended into one continuous sound.

"What?!"

"N-No way!"

"Woah-!"

Each student we passed gasped in shock. I sensed Nagumo's presence beside Horikita Manabu and felt like the three of us will eventually take the lead. Speeding through everyone in a straight line, and then curving our paths to reach the parallel side.

In this competition, wits, tactics, strategies-- none of them mattered. We can only run and run until we reach the finish line, and the one who gets there first would be the victor.

Alright, let's kick this up a notch, shall we?

Author's Notes:

Apologies that I had to separate the ending part of the race. This was supposed to be included in the last chapter-part, but the one I uploaded was an incomplete version. Turns out, the continuation I wrote (which is the content of this chapter-part) wasn't saved.

Also, I removed that annoying retard who stumbled in fear after seeing Kiyotaka approaching him at light speed.

Vol. 5: Chapter 18.1 - The End of the Sports Festival

"You've really caused a commotion..." Horikita's perplexed sigh hurt my feelings, but at least she was thankful.

"Don't be too hard on Kiyotaka-kun. He beat Horikita-senpai and Nagumo-senpai without breaking a sweat!" Kikyou crossed her arms as she puffed her chest, looking proud. Saying that I beat them without breaking a sweat would be an exaggeration.

The race ended with me being crowned the victor. The crowd was surprised, to say the least. The loudest group was, of course, Class 1-A. Some of the boys even teared up because of the hype. I wish they could stop the overreaction. I'm the one getting embarrassed here, you know?

"You're the prime target for Nagumo now. Are you really okay with this?" she asked.

"Yeah. I made it clear that the whole race was your idea. Since you were injured, it only made sense for you to assign someone else."

"But that's the thing. If it was someone high profile like Hirata-kun, then I think Nagumo would understand. But you're unknown in the senior sphere. Not only that. Hirata-kun would probably put up a good fight, but there's no way he can compete with my brother on that level. Even Sudou-kun would lose. But you beat him. Saying that it caught everyone off guard would be an understatement."

"That's right... Iida-senpai and Konishi-senpai approached me earlier. They were really freaking out, you know? You're the talk of all the third-years right now," said Kikyou.

"Iida-senpai... and Konishi-senpai?" muttered the curious Horikita.

"They're from Horikita-senpai's class. Kiyotaka-kun became acquainted with them recently," she explained.

"I think we're still fine for now." I finally spoke. "Their reactions are strong, but that's just because of the novelty. In the end, you're still the mastermind behind that show in Nagumo's mind."

We also have the first-years to assist us with that. I don't know about Sakayanagi's class, but everyone from Ichinose's class knows my ridiculous record during swimming, and Ryuen wouldn't hide anything if his classmates ask him about my physical abilities. If

they're acquainted with seniors and those seniors ask about me, they'll be able to answer in a way that would make it feel like my show of athleticism wasn't that much of a big deal.

If I decided to hold back from the very beginning, this move would've been much riskier.

"It's not that strange, anyway. Your results for the entire sports festival were near-perfect already," Kikyoku shrugged.

Because of my absence, I failed to take the MVP title. And for the overall results...

Earlier...

"Kiyotaka-kun!" Kikyoku ran up to me, most likely going for a hug. However, she managed to stop herself before doing anything careless.

Not even one second after I heard her voice...

"Kiyotaka!"

"Ayanokouji!"

The boys tackled me with all their might, with Ken leading the charge. I accepted my fate and fell to the ground.

"I knew you were gonna win!" Ken celebrated.

"You were fast as hell! What the heck was that Ayanokouji?!" Ike excitedly asked.

"You don't even look tired!" yelled Onizuka.

"I'm actually in a world of pain right now, so please get off me..."

I'm a warrior who gave everything he got for everyone. I would appreciate it if you could treat me more gently.

"You're so amazing, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"So dashing!"

The girls gave me praise, as well. And thankfully, since the boys were too hyped, they didn't have the time to get jealous and spite me for it.

"Get back to your posts, everyone." Chabashira-sensei approached us and beckoned everyone to calm down.

We were instructed to sit tight for the closing ceremony. After that will be the final results. The speeches and closing remarks didn't take too long, so the students' enthusiasm never waned.

"We will now announce the results of this year's Sports Festival!"

Everyone cheered excitedly.

The gigantic screen lit up and showed two colors separated with a label saying "Red Team" and "White Team". The tallied numbers under those labels were added up into one final score.

Red Team Wins!

The coalition between Class A and Class D took home the overall victory. Celebrations of glee could be heard all over the place.

"Next up, we will now announce the results for each class's overall points!"

The scoreboard was once again shown on the large electronic screen. Everyone carefully digested the final scores. All twelve classes were divided into three separate years.

Our eyes focused on the Freshmen category.

1st-Year Category:

1st Place: Class B

2nd Place: Class C

3rd Place: Class D

4th Place: Class A

"Agh! We lost!"

"Oh no..."

"Damn it..." Ken cursed under his breath.

"Well, this was to be expected after our previous losses."

"Class B got the win, huh...?"

"Class D almost won against Class C..."

"Their points were super close."

"Ahh, that's a shame..."

Even with Sakayanagi's absence, Class B still beat all of us with a considerable amount of lead. Ichinose's Class C took second place by a very small margin against Ryuuen's class who got third place. Our class had the third lowest amount of total points out of everyone, only beating the Class C's from the other years. Class 2-D secured second place while Class 3-D secured third place in their respective categories. The other Class A's took first place with overwhelming leads.

Kouenji's absence during the early events affected us a lot, and Horikita's injury leave left us in a very bad spot. And the biggest cause of our loss was the leaked participation table. We were doomed from the very beginning.

In the end, our class points got a 100-point deduction instead 200 points thanks to the Red Team's big win. Even though Sakayanagi's class won first place, they still received a 50-point deduction for being in the White Team. Ichinose's class suffered just as much as ours by getting 100 class points deducted from them, too. And by extension, Ryuuen's class also received a 50-point deduction. All of our class points decreased, but Class B and D still technically got the final laugh.

"And lastly, we will now announce the MVP for each school year!"

As the winners celebrated and the losers lamented, the screen

changed to show the MVP results.

1st-Year MVP: Shibata Sou

2nd-Year MVP: Nagumo Miyabi

3rd-Year MVP: Horikita Manabu

"Gaaah! I lost!" yelled Ken.

Shibata had consistently placed highest like Ken, so their battles would've been very close. In fact, I'd say Ken was in the lead, especially during the individual competitions. Team competitions like the Cavalry Battle, Capture the Flag, and Tug of War made the difference for the two of them.

"That's too bad, Ken." Akito, whose cheek had a bandage plastered on it, patted him on the shoulder with a smug look.

"Argh!" he cried in frustration before sighing. "I'll be back for revenge next year."

"Sorry, Sudou. If it weren't for unathletic students like me, you could've won the title." Yukimura stepped up to apologize. The other guys looked guilty, as well.

"Nah. I knew what I was going into beforehand and still thought that I could win. Since I lost, I won't blame it on anyone else," he replied.

If you ask me who had the most growth in the class, Ken would be my answer alongside Horikita. He could still work on his temper, but his mind is in the right place. He'll only continue to grow from here on out.

Of course, problems will come along the way. It's up to him whether he can overcome them or not. The same goes for Horikita and everyone in Class A.

The students scattered after the end of the festival was officially announced. Most of us went back to the classroom to grab our things.

"I'm so tired..." groaned Ueno.

"You moved the least out of all of us!" bantered Onizuka.

"Sorry, but this is already too much for me. Any more and I might collapse on the floor..." he replied, sounding listless.

"W-When you say it like that, I can't help but believe you..."

I observed everyone while arranging my stuff.

"Was Nene-chan alright?" Ryuuko asked, looking worried.

"She didn't seem like herself today..." said Azuma.

"Kikuchi-kun said that he'll take her to the infirmary," answered Ichihashi.

"Kikyou-chan!" waved Onodera.

"Yep, I'm coming!" she replied excitedly.

"Are coming with us, Kayoko-chan?" asked Mii-chan.

"Oh, sorry! I made plans with Karuizawa-san and the others!" Ishikura pressed her hands together in apology.

"Kayokocchi, let's go?" called Karuizawa.

Ishikura said her goodbyes to Kikyou and the others before meeting up with Karuizawa's group.

"Hey, Kayoko-chan, your brother was amazing back there. Introduce me sometime!" Sonoda started on a topic as soon as they got together.

Their voices started to fade out as they walked out of the room.

"Kiyotaka! You coming?" Akito called out to me.

"Uh... I've got something to take care of. I think I'll be a bit late," I replied.

"Geez, don't keep us waiting, okay? Airi and I will prepare lots of food to eat, after all."

"I can't wait for Airi's cooking!" Ken said, pumping his fist in the air.

"Just Airi's?" Haruka narrowed her eyes as she questioned him.

"Y-Yours, too, of course..." he answered nervously.

"We'll wait for you, Kiyotaka-kun..." said Airi.

"It's related to Horikita and some stuff about school, so I don't know how long it'll take. I don't mind if you start without me, but I'll definitely make it."

"Alright... But I'll sock you if you don't come!"

Is it just me or does Haruka sound more violent than Ken these days...?

Presently...

"The event was being broadcasted in the infirmary, so I got to watch everything along with some other incapacitated students. I knew you'd be able to convince Nii-san, but... to think he'd do *that* just to compete with you..."

I messaged Horikita beforehand, so she stayed inside the infirmary instead of returning. I brought her things for her, instead.

"I was a bit surprised myself. Nagumo joined in, but I didn't really care whether or not he did. I just wanted to challenge your brother, after all."

"I see," she sighed. "And so? I'm curious to know why Kushida-san is here. I thought you were going to hang out with your friends."

"I never planned on joining them from the very beginning. Kiyotaka-kun said he needed me for something."

Kikyou must've judged that it was better to lie about suddenly having an emergency rather than telling her friends in advance that

she had plans with someone else.

"For something... I assume you needed me, as well? That's why you came here?"

"Yeah. It's fine if you can't go due to your injury, though."

"No, it's fine. I can walk a little bit now after getting some rest."

As the leader, Horikita didn't want to stay in the dark.

"Is that so? Then we should get going before it's too late."

The two of them have no knowledge of what I'm referring to, but they didn't ask any questions. I don't mind answering, but they must've thought that it's better to see whatever it was for themselves.

Vol. 5: Chapter 18.2 - Behind the Leak

There were a lot of inconspicuous locations around this city-like campus. One of which would be the place we were going to right now.

"Oh, this seems like a nice place to make shady deals. Perfect for you, Kiyotaka-kun." Kikyou smiled cutely.

"That's true." I can't help but agree.

We were currently near the edge of the campus, just a few buildings along the westmost boulevard. Most of them are used as storehouses, so there was little to no chance for any students to be here. That's especially true now that the sports festival just ended.

(Reference: Classroom of the Elite - Season 2 - Episode 6)

"This should be a good spot," I whispered.

Voices could be heard not far from where we were. With careful steps, the three of us slowly crept up beside the corner of a certain building.

"You're satisfied now, right? Class A lost 100 points. Class B won." A familiar voice of a male student shocked Horikita and Kikyou.

"Fufufu. Indeed we have. It's too bad that we still lost 50 class points in the end."

"That's... not our fault anymore." Another familiar voice replied--this time, from a female student.

"Please don't fret, Mori-san. As per our agreement, we will delete the video after the sports festival is over. There's no need to worry."

Horikita was perplexed while Kikyou's expression was dark. We knew the voices of all three students. Our classmates, Mori and Kikuchi were currently talking to Class B's leader, Sakayanagi Arisu. It seems like some truths will finally be revealed.

"Sorry, Mori-san. We won't bother you after this..." Another female voice was heard. The tone sounded more exhausted than remorseful.

Judging from Horikita's reaction, it didn't seem like she knew her.

"Here. Please delete the video yourself. Although we won't be able to prove it, please believe that we didn't make any copies. We won't use that '*incident*' against you in the future," said Sakayanagi.

It didn't seem like they made a deal involving a contract.

A few seconds passed, with Mori or Kikuchi probably deleting whatever it was that they had to delete.

"Here you go. Please take your phones back, as well. Thank you for your assistance Kikuchi-kun. I would love to get your help again in the future but..."

"Don't even think about it. I won't betray my class again."

"I see. Well, that's a shame. I don't mind reserving a spot for you and Mori-san in our class before graduation, you know?"

"Sakayanagi-san, are you serious?" asked the other girl.

"No, thanks. We'll pass up on that *'offer'*," Mori answered strongly.

"Fufufu, I merely jest. But I will welcome anyone who's willing," Sakayanagi replied with a relaxed voice. "Even though I didn't participate in the sports festival, today has been a tiring day for me, as well. Do take care now, you two."

The sound of Sakayanagi's cane could be heard as she walked away with the other female student. After I signaled their exit, Horikita didn't think twice about showing her presence.

"Kikuchi-kun, Mori-san... Would you like to explain what just happened here?"

"Horikita-san...?" Kikuchi was surprised, but he didn't seem flustered.

"Why are you here...?" Mori, on the other hand, looked confused.

Kikyou and I followed her out, further adding to Mori's shock.

Most areas inside the campus have benches to sit on. This place wasn't an exception. We sat down to have a conversation with the two people in question.

"So you're the one who leaked the participation table to Sakayanagi-san?" asked Horikita.

Kikyou and I sat on the side as Horikita was scolding them.

"Yeah. It was me. Just so you know, I do feel bad... but I don't regret what I did," replied Kikuchi.

"Please don't blame Eita, Horikita-chan... It was my fault."

"Is that so? Then do enlighten me."

"That girl that Sakayanagi-san was with earlier-- that was Busujima-san, right?" asked Kikyou.

"Yes... We're both members of the Volleyball Club."

Busujima Rin. I heard about her from Ken. As expected of Kikyou. Well, it wasn't strange for someone like her to know.

"It was Sakayanagi-san's ploy... After the briefing for the sports festival, Busujima-san contacted me, saying she wanted to talk about the club. I already felt that something was off because she asked me to come to the special building."

"And then?"

"There were only two of us, so I thought everything was fine. Busujima-san suddenly told me that I was being lazy in the club..."

and that the seniors didn't like me. That's when we started to argue."

"They tried to set you up, huh?"

"Yes... They were actually recording a video in secret. It was filmed at a convenient angle so the actual events didn't look clear."

"What exactly did they accuse you of?"

"Violence..." she answered. "They made it seem like I hit Busujima-san and caused her to fall down."

They all had grim expressions.

"Wait... Nene-chan, how did it even happen...?" Kikyō asked gently.

As Mori grew increasingly more nervous, Kikuchi decided to take the reins.

"The video was taken from a considerable distance with Busujima's backside covering most of the view. Their plan was to call Nene's phone, and the moment she tried to answer the call, Busujima suddenly moved to grab the phone from her hands."

"And that's when the actual footage started," said Horikita.

"Not only that... The person filming the video already had their own narrative to blemish the truth."

"You mean to say...?"

"When the footage started, Nene and Busujima were already clutching the phone in their hands. That's when the person said *"Why is that girl trying to grab Busujima-san's phone..."*, and after Nene forcefully grabbed the phone, Busujima fell on her own. Of course, the person who filmed the scene followed it up with *"She hit her!"*, before ending the footage while running up to *'help Busujima'*. Those statements would obviously be used to strengthen their side of the argument."

The narrative was that the girl who recorded the video only wanted to have some drama on camera, but they eventually ran to help the victim when the argument turned into something more serious.

If the acting was great, then I don't see them winning in a trial without any counterevidence.

"Who's this person, anyway?"

"They never told us, but it was probably a girl from Class D. The evidence wouldn't be as potent if she was a classmate," Kikuchi shrugged.

An accomplice. If Mori and Kikuchi tried to fight back, Sakayanagi would probably make her step forward as a witness.

"But isn't there a fatal flaw in their setup?" pondered Horikita.

"Yeah, I know... The call history can be our counterevidence. We can use it to prove that the phone belonged to Nene..." said Kikuchi.

"I also brought that up before, but it's not that simple. Apparently, Busujima had already involved a senior from the volleyball club. She informed them beforehand about confronting Nene and asked them to call her around the time when the incident was filmed. So, Busujima can also use her call history to match Nene's. And the call that Nene got-- It was from Sonoda."

Sonoda Chiyo, a girl from our class.

"Chiyo isn't an accomplice. It could've been any other girl. Sakayanagi-san orchestrated the whole thing by using another Class D girl. Once the time was right, that Class D girl would ask any girl from our class who had my contact to call me with the pretext of asking something," said Mori.

That is indeed tricky. The other party can always claim that the call Mori received was nothing more than a coincidence. Sakayanagi also used students from Class D, so tracing their connection back to her and Busujima would be near-impossible.

"I see... So that's how they cornered you," said Horikita. "Alright. I'll let this matter go, for now. We won't let the other Class A students know, as well."

"Kiyotaka-kun... This whole thing-- it sounds awfully familiar..."

"Yeah. It was a replication of what Ryuuen tried to do to Ken back then."

It's almost like Sakayanagi was trying to send a message to Ryuuen. *"I'll do what you tried to do, but succeed."*

It was hard to imagine Ryuuen's full cooperation if Sakayanagi's goal was to one-up him, but she probably solved it by negotiating with private points.

Of course, Sakayanagi never had the intention of expelling Mori. She was merely a pawn to use for the sports festival. She could continue soliciting her and Kikuchi's cooperation, but she let them go. Sakayanagi was telling us that she was confident enough to obtain more pawns if she wanted.

"I'm still scared... Sakayanagi-san might be lying about not making any copies of the video..." said Mori.

"That is a possibility," replied Horikita.

Kikyou seemed to want to say something, but she stopped herself.

I personally don't think Sakayanagi would lie about that, but I'm not obligated to tell them my opinion.

"I-It's okay, Nene-chan... I'll try to talk to Sakayanagi-san myself if that happens." Kikyou tried to comfort her instead.

"Apart from the participation table, what else did she demand from you?" Horikita asked, moving the conversation forward.

"Nothing. I never really talk to them. The moment you gave us the participation table, all I did was forward the image to a dummy

account provided by Sakayanagi. Of course, I also used a dummy account of my own to send it."

"But... How did Sakayanagi-san make use of it, anyway? Did Ichinose-san lie about them submitting their participation table together?" asked Mori.

According to Ichinose; Class B and Class C submitted their participation table together. Ryuen's Class D submitted theirs, afterward. The last class to submit was Class A. So even if Kikuchi leaked the participation table, they would've been unusable. Of course, that wasn't the case, as we've seen at the sports festival.

"I don't think that's it, Mori-san. I finally realized how they did it... But, it was all too late."

I see. So Horikita finally figured it out, huh?

"I was also racking my brain about how they did it... If Ichinose didn't lie, then we probably missed a vital detail," said Kikuchi.

"The teachers and their involvement. That's what we all missed..."

"The teachers..." Kikyou muttered.

"Long story short, Ryuen-kun and Sakayanagi-san didn't submit their participation table during the time we thought they did. Sakayanagi-san deceived Ichinose-san because she knew we'd ask her."

"What about Chabashira-sensei...?"

"I don't think Chabashira-sensei lied to us. Instead of the participation table, Ryuen-kun and Sakayanagi-san must've shown their homeroom teachers a paper containing a bunch of instructions. It might've been a script of what they wanted them to say or an instruction to make them act in a certain way."

Based on what Horikita told us back then, Sakagami-sensei's words were along the lines of *"This is reasonable."* and *"I'll deliver your participation table safely."* They were vague and streamlined. None of them were a direct confirmation that the paper he was holding was indeed Class D's participation table.

"They can do that...?"

"Yes. And I think Chabashira-sensei already knew. The reason why she couldn't tell us what was actually happening might be related to the school's policies. But even then, Chabashira-sensei already gave us a big hint."

"Ah! She did! If I remember correctly, Chabashira-sensei said *"I can cooperate if you ever want me to do anything."* or something similar to that, right?" Kikyou asked.

"Yes... But I didn't realize what she meant back then."

"In others, Ryuen and Sakayanagi pretended to submit their participation tables by using duds. And they also got the help of their teachers to indirectly deceive us..."

"The fact that they made their move as early as the very first briefing meant that they already had this planned from the start... I admit my defeat completely..." Horikita looked down in frustration.

"Horikita-san... I don't think there's anything we could've done."

"Ayanokouji-kun would've done something." Horikita's subtle glance indicated her train of thought. Once again, she'd realized how outclassed she is right now.

"The fact that you figured everything out on your own is a sign of growth. You'll catch up to them eventually, Horikita."

"Yes... But I can't take too long, or our position as Class A will be put in jeopardy."

When the five of us decided to go back, continuing our conversation as we walked toward the dorm.

"How did the three of you know where we were?" Mori asked.

"Oh, now that you say that, it was Kiyotaka-kun who guided us here."

"I asked him for help," answered Kikuchi.

"I didn't really know the details, but Kikuchi asked me to bring you guys to this place."

"I wanted Horikita-san to know the truth, at least. And I don't really mind if Kushida-san or Hirata gets to know. Sorry for bringing you into this, Ayanokouji. I know you didn't want to get involved."

"This much is fine." It was honestly not a problem. Doing favors for a friend-- it's not so bad.

Vol. 5: Chapter 18.3 - Celebration

Kikuchi and Mori decided to go to Keyaki Mall to blow off some stress. I think they'll meet with Sugawara and the others.

I'm sure Horikita and Kikyou would like to do the same, so I thought I'd make a call and give them a suggestion.

"Is it alright if I invite Horikita and Kikyou?"

"Oh, by all means!" answered Airi.

"Why not?! The more, the merrier!" I heard Haruka shouting in the background.

After getting confirmation from the hosts of the party, I gave the nod to Horikita and Kikyou.

"We're still in our uniforms, though. Is it okay?"

"Don't worry about it. Ken and the others went straight to Airi's room so they're also in their uniforms." I'm also wearing my uniform right now. Students who changed inside the campus were required to wear it.

"Is my presence necessary?" asked Horikita.

"I won't force you if you don't wanna go, but you've got no plans, right? You can relax with us in this little get-together."

"You're the class leader, aren't you? You better start socializing or the other leaders will look down on you," said Kikyou.

"Is that so...?" Horikita looked skeptical. "Well, putting that aside, I don't really mind going. It's not like I'm a total stranger, being Ayanokouji-kun's friend and all."

Horikita concurred without much resistance. Seeing her be such an agreeable person makes me happy.

"Huh-?" Her words froze Kikyou. Honestly, if I heard Horikita saying something like that for the first time, then I would've had the same reaction.

"Welcome, Kyou-chan and Horikita-san! Oh, and Kiyopon, too!" Haruka greeted.

So I'm just an afterthought now, huh? And that's coming from the person who said she'll sock me if I didn't come.

"Your room is so cute, Airi-chan!"

"T-Thank you... Please, make yourselves at home."

"Then, I'll sit around here." Horikita grabbed a book from her bag and started reading.

"Alright! Now that we're complete, let's celebrate the end of this year's sports festival! Cheers!" Haruka raised her soda for a toast.

All of us followed suit before drinking.

"Celebrate, huh...?" Akito smiled wryly.

"Ah, don't be a stinker now, Miyacchi! We won as part of the Red Team, remember?"

"Yeah, thanks to the seniors..." said Ken. "Aghh! I really wanted to get MVP, damn it!"

"How does it feel to be in third place, potentially?" Akito asked with a smug smile.

"Hah?! What do you mean by third?!"

"Well, Shibata did beat you this time, and if Kiyotaka didn't get injured, he'd be MVP. That drops you in third place, right?"

"S-Shit... You're right! Aghhhh, damn it!" Ken chugged down his soda like a drunk middle-aged office man depressed about his work.

After a few minutes, we proceeded to eat the food prepared by Airi and Haruka. It was just in time for dinner, so we probably wouldn't need to eat again later. Us guys just yakked about how we could've won while the girls had their own fun talk. Some interesting topics came up later on when our groups merged again as a whole.

Time passed and I came back from the restroom after washing my hands. My friends were noisily cleaning up the dining table while eating some leftovers. I hear my name pop up here and there in their conversations, but I decided to ignore them.

As I got back, I saw Kikyou and Horikita hanging out near Airi's bed. Well, hanging out would be a little bit generous here. Horikita just continued reading while she listened to Kikyou's rambles.

"Ah, Kiyotaka-kun, come join us!" Kikyou beckoned me to sit beside them.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I was wondering about earlier. Did Horikita-san mean what she said when she called you her friend?"

I looked over to Horikita who quietly held her book... Hey, you're blushing.

"I don't know. Did you mean it?" I asked her.

"I did. I don't care if the feeling is mutual or not, but that's how I perceive you now."

A smooth answer. Good job holding on to your poker face, Horikita. I gave her an internal thumbs-up.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're thinking of something rude, aren't you?" Her glare felt like needles prickling my skin.

"No..." As I thought, this girl is scary.

"Hmmmph!" Kikyou pouted. "Stop acting like you can read each other's minds! I'm feeling left out."

"Let's find out!" Before Kikyou could complain some more, the three of us suddenly heard Ken's loud voice. "Hey, Kushida. Are you really not dating Kiyotaka?"

"W-What...?" She must be used to this question by now, but Kikyou still acted like she was caught off-guard.

"We're curious-- well, mostly Ken. Kiyotaka's not that much of a sharer, so we figured asking you would be better."

"I already told you the answer a long time ago..." I groaned.

"Exactly. That was a long time ago, Kiyoon. Things can change, you know?" Haruka patted my shoulder.

Behind them was Airi, anxiously waiting for Kikyou's answer.

"Ahh... Well, Kiyotaka-kun and I aren't really dating. We're just friends." Kikyou smiled as she answered them.

Her vulnerable, wry smile was evident. There's no way Haruka and Airi wouldn't pick up on that.

"I see... Well, I kind of already knew..." said Haruka.

"Who do you like then?" The tactless Ken continued asking her.

"Well..." Kikyou looked a bit uncomfortable.

Whack!

"Ow!"

Haruka and Akito smacked the back of Ken's head at the same time.

"You've got no delicacy, idiot."

"S-Sorry..."

"It's fine, Sudou-kun..." Kikyou hurriedly reassured him.

"I'm sure you're used to that question already, Kyou-chan. You're the most popular girl in school, after all."

"Ahaha... You're exaggerating, Haruka-chan..."

"But I get it. It's not as great as some people normally think it is. A kind girl like you will surely attract unpleasant goons."

"Unpleasant goons?" Ken tilted his head.

"I remember it back then, Kyou-chan! A guy from Class D got angry after you rejected his confession, right?"

"B-Back then...?" Kikyou looked up, trying to recall what happened. "When Hirata-kun helped me out?"

"Yes, yes! I wanted to walk up and help you, but I'm glad Hirata-kun was there."

Kikyou had briefly mentioned this to me before, but she didn't go into detail. I doubt Hirata's presence was a coincidence. I wouldn't be surprised if she asked for his help in advance after anticipating the guy's potential response.

"Ahh... I think I remember something like that happening."

"Anyway, what I'm saying is that from now on, you can come to us if you're in trouble!" Haruka grabbed Kikyuu's hands, her eyes sparkling. "But that's beside the point. Ken sounded crude, but we're also curious, you know? Is there anyone you like right now, Kyou-chan?"

"Eh? Err, well, no... And even if I did, I don't really feel like I want to date anyone at the moment."

"I see..." Haruka smiled. "I guess that makes sense. Given how friendly you are, it's hard to find a genuinely good partner... Most boys in our year are filled with ulterior motives, after all."

"Hey, girls are filled with ulterior motives, too!" Ken protested.

"Ahaha! That is true, but it's a matter of convenience, Kencchin. And it depends on the person. Most boys try to get all friendly with Kyou-chan with the expectation of dating her, but that's nothing other than troublesome! I'm sure Hirata-kun felt the same way back when he was single." Haruka explained. "Now let's say the same thing happened to you. If you were the subject of many girls' affections, you'd be thrilled, right?"

"Wha-? W-Well... I guess so..."

"Did you feel that way, too, Kiyotaka-kun?" asked Airi.

"Not really. I don't think I've been inconvenienced in any way..."

"Even though you're really popular?"

"Well, *'popular'* might be an exaggeration at this point. I'm not like Hirata. He has a girlfriend, but girls are still approaching him. Probably because he's really friendly. In my case, the novelty of the mysterious honor student from Class 1-A had probably worn out."

A logical explanation if I do say so myself. Seeing Akito and Ken's understanding nods validated my thoughts but... Airi and the other girls started chuckling as if I said something silly. Even Horikita was grinning a little bit.

"I thought it made a lot of sense. Did Kiyotaka say something weird?" asked Ken.

Akito and I were thankful for this blockhead's straightforwardness.

"I don't think the *'novelty'* had worn out at all, you know?" said Kikyuu.

"You're just in a lucky spot, Kiyoon. Lots of girls are crazy about you, but because you're not as outgoing and friendly as Hirata-kun, they're too afraid to do the initial approach. Since the girls don't know how you'll react, they can't openly show their interest in you as easily. That's why you're never inconvenienced."

"I see..." I replied.

"Ohh, that *does* make a lot of sense." Ken nodded repeatedly.

"And I guess your popularity will start extending to the sophomores and seniors after your show at the sports festival," added Akito.

"Aww, Kyou-chan did amazingly well, too! I'm sure lots of creeps from the upperclassmen will go after you even more now!" The touchy Haruka hugged Kikyou from the side.

"I-It's alright, Haruka-chan. Even then, I still want to try my best and be friends with everyone." Kikyou replied with a smile.

"Damn right, they're annoying! I hope they all die! But, I still want them to continue obsessing over me~!" is what she's probably thinking, though...

"Eh...?" Haruka suddenly turned to me with a confused look.

I then realized that Kikyou was staring at me with a very bright grin.

"What are you thinking about, Kiyotaka-kun?" she asked cutely.

"Nothing..."

Yeah... These girls are scary...

"U-Um... K-Kikyou-chan..." Airi raised her voice. "I... I really admire how you can be friends with anyone. I wish I could learn a bit from you."

"Is that your desire, too?" Kikyou asked gently.

"Well... I wouldn't say that... But I want to open myself up to others more-- I think."

"I understand. I believe you can do it, Airi-chan. I'll help you out whenever I can," she nodded.

Back then, Airi was still guarded against Kikyou after sensing something from her eyes. But I guess she eventually decided to befriend her despite that, mostly thanks to Haruka's influence.

After successfully diverting the topic away from romance, we managed to talk some more before finally ending the party.

"Thank you very much, everyone! I never thought that I'd be able to invite friends into my place for a party," said Airi.

"You better get used to it, then!" replied Ken.

"Airi's room isn't a party house," rebutted Haruka.

"Thanks to you, too, Airi-chan! I had lots of fun." Kikyou grabbed and held Airi's hands.

"See you later, Horikita."

"Yeah. I hope you get well soon, leader!"

Ken and Akito said their goodbyes to Horikita, as well.

"Thank you for tonight. I appreciate it," she bowed.

And with that, it was finally time for us to head back and rest.

"I'll take the elevator down with you guys. I have something to get before going back to my room," said Kikyou.

"Then I'll head back with Suzunon!" said Haruka.

"Suzunon...?" All of us tilted our heads, including Horikita herself.

"It's Horikita-san's nickname, of course!" she answered as-a-matter-of-factly. "Is it not allowed...?"

Seeing her pleading face, Horikita's exhaustion overcame her embarrassment.

"Ugh... Do what you want..." she groaned.

"Yay! Let's go, Suzunon!" They started walking down the hallway, with Haruka still trying to chat up Horikita. "You should call me by my first name, too, okay? Ah, but I'm also fine with a nickname!"

"Horikita just gave up, huh?" commented Akito.

"Well... It's Haruka, after all..." followed Ken.

After deciding not to think about it too much, the four of us went on our way down. After saying goodbye to Ken and Akito, I headed down to the first floor with Kikyou.

"Are you going to keep me company, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"Yeah, do you mind?"

"Nope, not at all."

Winter is just around the corner, and the winds of the night will be cold. Kikyou put on her cardigan as we walked out of the dorm building's automatic door.

Vol. 5: Chapter 18.4 - A King's Weakness

(20:35) [I need to talk to you.]

Horikita finally decided to contact me, huh?

(20:36) [About what?]

(20:36) [It's about the class traitor.]

(20:36) [Something didn't sit right with me earlier.]

(20:36) [Kikuchi just asked me for a favor earlier.]

(20:36) [I think it's better if you talk to Hirata instead.]

(20:36) [I see.]

(20:36) [Alright, I understand. I'll do that.]

I don't have to get involved with that matter right now. The two of them can probably tie whatever loose ends that issue had left. What's important is for Horikita to keep the class stable. Hirata would be the perfect right-hand man for the job.

"It's chilly out here." Kikyou started the conversation as soon as she saw me put my phone back inside my pocket.

"Yeah," I replied.

The way to the convenience store wasn't too far from the dorm, so we passed by some students who just got back from Keyaki Mall. Most of them were girls and guys from the sophomores. They waved at Kikyou, greeting her a good evening. They also gave me some curious glances, probably because they recognized me as the guy who competed with Nagumo earlier.

"The upper class will take notice of you now," Kikyou spoke after we walked a considerable distance.

"Seems like it."

"Why did you do it, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"To help Horikita," I answered.

"I meant your real reason," she chuckled.

Kikyou didn't believe me-- not even a single bit.

"What else would my reason be?"

"I don't know. It just... didn't seem like something you would do on a whim."

"In the future, Nagumo will take notice of me no matter what, even if I try to hide. What I did earlier was a pre-emptive move to make him categorize me early on as Horikita's pawn rather than a potential puppet master."

"Does Horikita-san know about that?"

"No, but she'll figure it out on her own."

"I see," Kikyō replied as the automatic door opened.

"Welcome," said the convenience store employee.

I came inside and checked some of the products. I recalled things that I might need, but maybe I'll just buy everything at once when I go to the supermarket.

"Thank you for your patronage!" The employee greeted us goodbye.

"Want some?" Kikyō handed the opened pack of gummy snacks to me.

I took one piece and ate it as we continued walking back. Looking at the small bag that contained what Kikyō bought, she probably ran out of a specific necessity.

"I don't like Hasebe-san at all," she said.

"Is that so?"

"I don't think she's insufferable like some of the girls in our class, but I can't stand the way she thinks."

"The way she thinks?"

"C'mon, Kiyotaka-kun. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

Kikyō's ability to assess people really is top-notch. I'm impressed she could figure out the underlying darkness behind Haruka's good-natured actions. Matsushita is probably the only one who can surpasses her in this area.

"No, not really."

"I see." Kikyō looked unconvinced, but she realized that I wouldn't budge even if I was really playing dumb.

The two of us stopped by a vending machine to get drinks.

"Hasebe-san looks down on me," she said. "The person she looks down on the most is Sakura-san, and I don't really care about that. But it pisses me off when she puts me in the same category as that hopeless girl."

Unlike in daytime, sound will bend towards the ground during nighttime, making Kikyō's voice easier to hear from afar. It would've been better if we continued this conversation indoors, but we were in a pretty open place. As long she doesn't raise her voice any more than this, we should be fine from eavesdroppers.

"It'll fix itself in the future," I replied.

"You think so? Well, whatever happens, happens." Kikyō shrugged, dropping the topic as if it wasn't that important, to begin with. "I'm more worried about the traitor situation."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think Kikuchi-kun's betrayal was everything... It just... didn't seem right."

"Do you have anything in mind?"

"Kikuchi-kun is a smart person, so Sakayanagi-san made the right move, using Nene-chan to corner him. I noticed how Nene-chan's behavior had changed, but everyone has their own problems. Subtle changes in demeanor like worry and anxiety were common, so I didn't single her out. I never thought she would be involved in this whole fiasco. And the actual traitor was Kikuchi-kun, whom I can't completely read..." Kikyuu explained. "It's done now. We've solved it... But for some reason, I can't help but feel like we're missing something."

Intuition. According to psychologists, it's based on the spontaneous information processing that explains the widespread phenomenon known as "highway hypnosis", which occurs when a driver travels for miles without actively thinking about the activity of operating the vehicle. It relies on the ability to match patterns, while the mind explores experience stored in long-term memory for comparable events and makes judgments in the moment based on them.

Another phrase that's synonymous to intuition would be "gut feelings", which would explain why people say things like *"I just felt like it."*, *"It felt right."*, *"It's muscle memory."* to justify their thoughts and decisions.

"What do you think, Kiyotaka-kun?"

I don't recall myself ever relying on intuition. To me, absorbing what I've learned and observed then making a concrete and logical solution yields the best result. It doesn't matter if you're not talented. If you can adapt and grow, you'll be the winner in the end.

"I honestly stopped thinking about it after the sports festival. But I can understand the underlying danger of a potential traitor lurking inside the class."

She smiled, expecting that kind of answer.

"It doesn't matter as long as they don't cause trouble for you, right?"

"Yeah," I replied.

Was it selfish? To me, it doesn't really matter. I'll keep things balanced, but I won't compromise for the sake of the class. I have no intention of doing that right now.

Meanwhile...

Ryuuen brought the phone to his ear, answering the call.

"Ohh, Sakayanagi. How did it go?"

"It seemed to go well. I'm sure Kikuchi-kun had relayed everything to

Horikita-san and the rest."

"Was Ayanokouji with them?"

"Yes."

"Great. Kikuchi was useful, but he's just a one-off pawn. It's better to get rid of him now."

"He's done well as a diversion, don't you think?"

"Yeah, he did." Ryuen scoffed as he glanced at the wall clock in his room. "Well, that ends our negotiation for the sports festival. Have fun playing with Suzune, Sakayanagi."

"And you?"

"The same thing that I've always been doing."

"Is that so? Well then. I do wish for your success."

After Sakayanagi hung up, Ryuen dialed a new number.

"Ah, Ryuen. What's up?" asked the person on the other end.

"Lay low for a while. Wait until the next special exam," replied Ryuen.

"Gotcha. And it's not like I planned on making contact, anyway. I'm starting to get pretty busy."

"A nobody like you? Getting busy?" Ryuen smirked, hearing the person's confident tone. "Well, you can do whatever you want as long as we have the same goal."

"Don't mock me, Ryuen. I'm doing this because you said you can expel Ayanokouji. I'm risking my own skin for this, you know?"

"Oh, please. I'm sure you've got an alibi or two. You've already made plans for the future, right?"

"I can only dream of running those plans unless we can take him out. That guy's such a pain in the ass."

"Kukuku. I never thought that you, of all people, would make a move to realize your ambitions. Women can really make men go crazy."

"Oh, shut it. Just contact me if I'm needed for your plans."

Ryuen hung up without responding before muttering on his own.

"It won't be long before we can close in on our target. A king has one glaring weakness, and that's his beloved queen."

SS.26 - Ayanokouji Kiyotaka Fans (6)

DATE: October 4th

TIME: 9:00 PM - 12:00 PM / 21:00 - 24:00

GROUP CHAT NAME: A.K. Fans

Total Members: 67

Males: 0

Females: 67

CLASS DISTRIBUTION:

1-A: 20

1-B: 13

1-C: 10

1-D: 4

2-A: 3

2-B: 2

2-C: 3

2-D: 2

3-A: 2

3-B: 3

3-C: 3

3-D: 2

NAMES OF MEMBERS:

Class 1-A:

01. 2M1I1 (Admin/Creator)
02. A2S
03. DeKai
04. Sawako
05. Memento
06. Nika0
07. Ui-tan
08. T0ka
09. Yuu-chan
10. Kabe-don
11. Shizu
12. Doragon
13. Haato

14. Salmoon
15. Kuru0t0
16. Hashiri
17. Ringo
18. Gh05T
19. Tamamo
20. Dach

Class 1-B:

01. Osa7jimi (Admin)
02. Beer4U
03. Fr00tky
04. Iiko
05. WestNight
06. PinkE
07. Kazuhime
08. DemonLord (*New*)
09. BlessedE3 (*New*)
10. NinjU (*New*)
11. KoyaHanoru (*New*)
12. Jasmine (*New*)
13. Grisaia (*New*)

Class 1-C:

01. BunBun (Admin)
02. Weivu1
03. WhiteFlower
04. Dreamuu
05. 2B~mi
06. Ay0
07. Miku
08. Jinja2
09. Fubuki-sama (*New*)
10. Ruumine (*New*)

Class 1-D:

01. Silver73 (*New*)
02. Kaji999 (*New*)
03. DesuEars (*New*)
04. BL0550M (*New*)

(Kindly check the Author's Notes before trying to deduce their identities.)

Class 2-A:

01. Gundou (*New*)
02. No1 (*New*)
03. Bookmark01 (*New*)

Class 2-B:

- 01. Sussa (*New*)
- 02. M31R0N (*New*)

Class 2-C:

- 01. Laito-chan (*New*)
- 02. B3LL (*New*)
- 03. CuriousNeko (*New*)

Class 2-D:

- 01. Wistelia (*New*)
- 02. PurePure (*New*)

Class 3-A:

- 01. Kojimaru (*New*)
- 02. RieKu (*New*)

Class 3-B:

- 01. Hollyhock (*New*)
- 02. Furawa (*New*)
- 03. AngryPeach (*New*)

Class 3-C:

- 01. Docchi (*New*)
- 02. Chii (*New*)
- 03. Shafuru (*New*)

Class 3-D:

- 01. POWAH (*New*)
- 02. K1m1k0 (*New*)

RULES:

1. Respect

- Please be respectful. This group chat exists to talk about our dear Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun.
- This group chat is a peace zone. This place will not be used to share information against Ayanokouji-kun and his class. Any actions deemed to be of this category will be marked as harmful and disrespectful.
- You may speak about yourself or others if they relate to the topic. However, private talks regarding one's class and personal matters do not have a place here.
- This is a fan chat where we can have fun talking about our idol. Those who write hateful comments for no reason will have their accounts banned after three **(3)** strikes.

2. Identities

- With respect to the first rule, no one is allowed to doxx or expose anyone's real-life identity. We value anonymity, and anyone who tries to break this rule will be banned **immediately**.

- If the creator finds out that the members are maliciously spreading other members' identities in real life, the group chat may be deleted entirely.
- The **Proximity Lock** feature is also enabled. (See Notes)
- This group chat aims to make its members feel secure so they can voice out their admiration for Ayanokouji-kun without restraint while still observing the rules.

CHATROOMS:

General Chatroom:

(21:01) [I guess I should welcome all the newcomers tonight... Honestly, I didn't think I needed to make new chatrooms for our Senpais, but because of what happened earlier during the sports festival, I don't think it can be helped. Geez, it's Ayanokouji-kun's fault for being too cool! Anyway, I'm 2M1I1, the creator of this group chat. You can @ me if you need anything. Please enjoy your stay!] (2M1I1)

(21:01) [Hi again, everyone! 🙌🙌🙌] (Nika0)

(21:01) [We're back!] (Kabe-don)

(21:01) [Hey girls! 😊] (T0ka)

(21:01) [Now, now. We don't need our newcomers to introduce themselves as we did before.]

(21:01) [Please do so in your own year level's chatroom. Of course, anyone is free to chat here, in the General Chatroom! 🐼🐼🐼]

(21:01) [Don't accidentally introduce yourselves using your real names, okay, Senpais?! 😬] (2M1I1)

(21:01) [Hi everyone! 🙌] (Nika0)

(21:01) [Don't mind us, third-years~! 🙌] (Chii)

(21:01) [Us second-years, too! We're just here to enjoy the chat!

😊] (Gundou)

(21:02) [I can't believe something like this existed!] (RieKu)

(21:02) [Well, we've had similar types of chats in the past, right?] (Furawa)

(21:02) [I'm sure more group chats like this exist in secret. 🐼♀🐼♀🐼♀🐼♀] (Hollyhock)

(21:02) [Nyaha! We have no intention of keeping this chat's existence buried under a rock.]

(21:02) [Everyone must know the Ayanokouji-kun's splendor! 🐼🐼] (BunBun)

(21:02) [That is true. 🐼🐼] (DeKai)

(21:02) [Ayanokouji-kun has quite the spirited classmates, huh?]

(AngryPeach)

(21:02) [Well, he's really cool. He even beat Nagumo-kun.] (No1)

(21:03) [We never expected him to beat Horikita-kun, too.]
(Kojimaru)

(21:03) [I was confused when Nagumo-kun and Horikita-kun stood still after the baton was passed to them. I didn't expect them to run at the same time to race each other!] (POWAH)

(21:03) [None of them were holding back, either. At least, I was sure that Horikita-kun wasn't holding back.] (RieKu)

(21:03) [I don't think Nagumo-kun was holding back, too. He was running against Horikita-senpai, after all. But in the end, Ayanokouji-kun still won. He's so cool!] (Gundou)

(21:03) [Wow! Now Ayanokouji-kun looks even cooler now that I know that! □] (Doragon)

(21:03) [He really won against *the* Nagumo-senpai and Horikita-senpai... How dreamy! □□□] (Miku)

(21:03) [Such a stud! I love him!] (Kabe-don)

(21:04) [Love! How bold! 🥰🥰🥰]

(21:04) [Speaking of which, I wonder how he'd feel if an upperclassman suddenly confesses to him?!] (K1m1k0)

(21:04) [We need your help, first-years! Does Ayanokouji-kun have a girlfriend? I heard she's close to Kushida-chan! I know she's in this chat, but it's not like I can just contact her out of nowhere. So if none of the other girls know, please DM me! 🍷🍷🍷] (Chii)

(21:04) [I don't think you need to say that, Senpai. Kikyou-chan was asked that question many times already by boys and girls alike. Both she and Ayanokouji-kun always say that they're just friends!] (T0ka)

(21:04) [Ahaha! Don't worry. I was merely half-joking. The nature of a secret group chat makes things like that very tricky.] (Chii)

(21:04) [Basically, all of us are still in the race. I don't know if Kushida-san likes him and wants to date him, but as long as nothing's official, I'm sure she understands the situation.] (DemonLord)

(21:04) [It's Kushida-chan, after all. She's a nice girl! 🥰]

(21:04) [Also, Kushida-chan should be a member of this group chat. So if you're reading this... Hi, Kushida-chan! 🙌🙌🙌]

(21:04) [Ah, you don't need to reply, though! □□]

(21:04) [But, well... Some of us, upperclassmen, have joined the race!] (Chii)

(21:05) [Nagumo-kun is amazing, but Ayanokouji-kun's sudden show of coolness made my heart flutter. I just didn't expect that.] (Sussa)

(21:05) [Horikita-kun is also popular among girls. He's smart and serious, but also kind. That said, there's something about Ayanokouji-kun that just really draws me in-- something similar to Horikita-kun...] (Shafuru)

(21:05) [It must be his mystery factor! Apart from a few girls, none of us really know that much about him. 🧐] (Weivu1)

(21:05) [Who are these girls?! I might ask for some pointers if needed!] (M31RON)

(21:05) [Most of the girls in our class are close to him. You can ask any of them! That includes me... but you don't know who I am. □□] (Ui-tan)

(21:05) [That's right, Senpai! Please don't hesitate to ask us!] (Ringo)

(21:05) [Uuu. The first-years are flexing! 🤩] (Chii)

(21:05) [Nyuhuhu. 🤩🤩] (Ui-tan)

(Casual chats continued until closing time.)

1st-Year Chatroom:

(21:02) [The seniors are having fun, aren't they?] (T0ka)

(21:02) [You're talking like a senior.] (2M1I1)

(21:02) [Ehehe. I'm just glad Ayanokouji-kun's well-deserved popularity is here.] (T0ka)

(21:03) [Me too!] (Memento)

(21:03) [But, I'm not too happy about it in some sense.] (Ui-tan)

(21:03) [I know! It's like when your favorite underground indie band becomes mainstream.] (Ringo)

(21:04) [Well, we've seen this coming from a mile away already.] (Kabe-don)

(21:04) [It can't be helped. Even though I'm not his classmate, I thought this was a foregone conclusion.] (Dreamuu)

(21:04) [Especially after his run during the relay...] (2B^mi)

(21:04) [Ahhh, just how cooler can he get?!] (Miku)

(21:05) [That's it. I'm confessing.] (Westnight)

(21:05) [Seriously?! 🤩] (Weivu1)

(21:05) [How brave...] (Sawako)

(21:05) [I can't take it anymore! I'm not even his classmate! 😞😞]

(21:05) [The least I can do is make him aware of my existence.] (WestNight)

(21:05) [If rumors of someone confessing start popping out, we'll probably find out who you are since girls rarely confess to Ayanokouji-kun.]

(21:05) [But whoever you are, @Westnight-san, good luck! 😊👍] (NinjU)

(21:07) [Thanks! But rumors, huh...?]

(21:07) [Well... I guess I don't want that. But I might just chicken out in the end, anyway. 🐼🐼] (Westnight)

(21:08) [Might as well confess in secret. 🐼] (PinkE)

(21:10) [Ayanokouji-kun has a lot of friends already... It's hard to make him notice you, especially if you're in a different class...]
(Jinja2)

(21:10) [I'm sure enough effort will yield results.] (Osa7jimi)

(21:10) [It wouldn't be strange if Ayanokouji-kun gets a girlfriend from the seniors right before Christmas.] (Salmoon)

(21:10) [Uwahh! Don't say something so ominous!] (Tamamo)

(21:10) [The early bird gets the worm, right?] (Salmoon)

(21:11) [That's true... but...] (Hashiri)

(21:27) [*"At this moment, the freshmen girls who wanted to date Ayanokouji-kun were seriously contemplating whether they'll confess to him soon or not."* □](T0ka)

(21:29) [An Esper?! 🐼🐼🐼] (Miku)

(21:32) [How dare you reveal what we were thinking?! 🐼🐼🐼]
(Grisaia)

(21:33) [That was scary...] (BlessedE3)

(21:35) [I thought the Proximity Lock was enabled... Did you leave your phone in your room and then secretly came to my room only to hear me monologuing about my plans of potentially confessing my feelings to Ayanokouji-kun???] (Kabe-don)

(21:35) [You guys suddenly stopped chatting! It's obvious what you girls were thinking.]

(21:35) [And what the heck, @Kabedon??? That was unnecessarily specific! Are you okay?!] (T0ka)

Class 1-A Chatroom:

(21:07) [My comrades, the time has come for the true battle. Ayanokouji-kun will be fought over by, not just freshmen, but sophomores and seniors, too! 🐼🐼] (2M111)

(21:08) [But just like before, we still have the advantage! We're the closest to him!] (Dachi)

(21:08) [That might be true, but we can only get so close!]

(21:08) [We can't even hang out with him!] (Ringo)

(21:015) [Kikyuu-chan, Horikita-san! Hasebe-san and Sakura-san, too! I know you're here! I just want to let you know that I'm envious of your position! I want to be super close to Ayanokouji-kun, too! 🐼🐼🐼] (Kabe-don)

(21:16) [Same. 🐼] (Nika0)

(21:16) [Same. 🐼] (Kuru0t0)

(21:17) [Same. 🐼] (Shizu)

(21:17) [Same. 🐼] (Gh05T)

(21:17) [Same. 🐼] (A2S)

(21:17) [Same. 🐼] (Tamamo)

(21:17) [Same. 🐼] (Yuu-chan)

(21:17) [Same. 🐼] (Ui-tan)

(21:17) [So you're indirectly telling us that you're not one of the four of them, huh, @Kabe-don-san? 🐼] (T0ka)

(21:18) [Maybe. Maybe not. 🐼] (Kabe-don)

(22:27) [I hope we can still have fun here even if Ayanokouji-kun gets a girlfriend.] (Memento)

(22:28) [Uwahh! It's the ominous line!] (2M1I1)

(22:28) [Don't crush our hopes, please!] (Hashiri)

(22:29) [Have mercy on our hearts!] (T0ka)

(22:30) [□□□] (Memento)

Class 1-B Chatroom:

(21:13) [It seems like we've become a bit crowded.] (Osa7jimi)

(21:13) [More than half of the class is here. That's pretty surprising.] (Kazuhime)

(21:13) [I didn't expect us to outnumber Ichinose-san class.]

(21:14) [They're more acquainted with Ayanokouji-kun, right?] (KoyaHanoru)

(21:14) [I guess that means more of them are just not aware of this group chat's existence. 🐼] (Jasmine)

(21:14) [Possibly...] (Saeko)

(21:16) [With that being said, what did you girls think about Ayanokouji-kun's display of speed earlier?] (Osa7jimi)

(21:16) [It was so cool! 🐼🐼] (BlessedE3)

(21:16) [My heart skipped a beat! 🐼🐼🐼] (Jasmine)

(21:16) [I can't believe he won! □] (Iiko)

(21:16) [Those were the two most athletic seniors! One of them is the Student Council President, and the other is almost guaranteed to be the next for the position!] (DemonLord)

(21:17) [Ayanokouji-kun for SCP? □] (Grisaia)

(21:17) [I'd vote! 🗳️] (NinjU)

(21:17) [What about Prime Minister?] (DemonLord)

(21:17) [He's too young for that! 🐼🐼🐼] (PinkE)

(21:18) [We're getting off-topic, everyone. 🐼] (Beer4U)

(21:18) [Ah, right.] (DemonLord)

(21:18) [Well, my view of him got higher, that's for sure.]

(21:19) [And it was already high. 🐼🐼] (WestNight)

(21:19) [Yes, me too.] (Iiko)

(21:19) [I see. Thank you for voicing out your opinions.]

(21:20) [Fufufu. My heart fluttered, as well.] (Osa7jimi)

Class 1-C Chatroom:

(21:27) [How's it going, everyone?]

(21:27) [It's finally open again! 🙌🙌🙌] (BunBun)

(21:27) [The creator really knew this would happen, huh?]
(Dreamuu)

(21:27) [Well, she's Ayanokouji-kun's classmate. I'm sure she knew he would stand out like that.] (Weivu1)

(21:27) [And because of that, every girl in school had taken note of him.] (Ay0)

(21:28) [We've only got 2-3 girls from the upper classes, though.
□] (2B^mi)

(21:28) [And Class B had outnumbered us! 🤔] (Miku)

(21:28) [Well, I personally have never mentioned anything about the group chat outside my room.]

(21:28) [I think the others were the same, so I'm not surprised that there aren't that many new girls from our class.] (Jinja2)

(21:29) [You think the Class B girls, did? □□□] (Fubuki-sama)

(21:29) [I don't know, of course. But it's not a competition, anyway. 😊] (Miku)

(21:30) [That's true.]

(21:30) [Anyway, it seems like Ayanokouji-kun will be the talk of the town now.] (Ruumine)

(21:30) [After beating Nagumo-senpai and Horikita-senpai, it's only natural. 🤔🤔🤔] (Ay0)

(21:30) [The girls in our class crushing on Ayanokouji-kun will have more competition now.] (Ruumine)

(21:30) [I think Honami-chan will win if she asks him out, though. □] (BunBun)

(21:30) [Ohh, that's true. Our Honami-chan cannot be underestimated. □] (Miku)

(21:30) [She keeps on denying that she likes him, right?]

(21:31) [Hey, Honami-chan, if you're here, then it's fine if you keep reading.]

(21:31) [Actually, *do* read our conversation. You might finally make up your mind. 🤔❤️] (BunBun)

(21:31) [But we should also support our other classmates who like him.] (Weivu1)

(21:32) [Of course! Though at the end of the day, it's going to be up to them how they can try to win him over. And fast!] (BunBun)

(21:32) [Romance shouldn't be this hectic... Well, it is, but not on this scale.] (Weivu1)

(21:32) [So many girls want to be his girlfriend, after all.]

(21:32) [It can't be helped.] (Dreamuu)

(21:32) [That's why I've given up on trying to do that.]

(21:32) [That said, I'll still be a fan of his.]

(21:33) [And a close friend, if possible.] (Ay0)

(21:33) [A lot of the girls in our class are well-acquainted with him already, and I'm one of them.]

(21:33) [So I can vouch for Ayanokouji-kun and say that he's a fun person to talk to!] (BunBun)

(21:33) [Aww, I'm envious! 🤔] (Jinja2)

(21:34) [I'm sure he'll talk to you if you tried. He's surprisingly approachable. 😊] (Weivu1)

(21:34) [And a good talker. 😊😊😊] (BunBun)

(21:35) [Yeah, that too... His appearance is really deceptive...] (Weivu1)

Class 1-D Chatroom:

(21:19) [Well, I didn't expect them to be so enthusiastic.] (DesuEars)

(21:19) [It looks fun, though! 😊] (BL0550M)

(21:20) [I guess so.] (DesuEars)

(21:20) [What the harm? Let's just hang out. The creator said it's fine if we just wanted to lurk and read, too.] (BL0550M)

(21:20) [I think I might just do that... I'm not that good at chatting up others.] (Kaji999)

(21:20) [Well, I do consider myself a fan of Ayanokouji-kun, even though our class has beef with theirs. 🤖🤖🤖] (Silver73)

(21:20) [He is cool, but he kinda scares me at the same time...] (DesuEars)

(21:21) [That's only natural... After *that*...] (Silver73)

(21:21) [Yeah...] (Kaji999)

(21:21) [Yeah...] (BL0550M)

(21:29) [I wonder if more of our classmates would join in the future...] (DesuEars)

(21:29) [Who knows?] (BL0550M)

(21:30) [Some of them might've developed a crush on Ayanokouji-kun after the sports festival.] (DesuEars)

(21:31) [That makes sense...] (BL0550M)

(21:31) [Do any of you have a crush on him? 📄] (DesuEars)

(21:31) [I'm not sure...] (Kaji999)

(21:32) [I don't wanna say crush... but I find him handsome. 😊] (Silver73)

(21:32) [Huhuhu! I want him to forget about me so he can have a better first impression of me! 🤖🤖🤖] (BL0550M)

(21:32) [All of us do... but well... 🤖] (DesuEars)

(21:33) [Now, now. We can't do anything about the past.]
(Silver73)

(21:33) [Let's work hard... ☹] (Kaji999)

Additional Group Chat Settings:

- General Chatroom: Public
 - 1st-Year Chatroom: Exclusive to 1st-Years
 - Class 1-A Chatroom: Private
 - Class 1-B Chatroom: Private
 - Class 1-C Chatroom: Private
 - Class 1-D Chatroom: Private
 - 1st-Year Chatroom: Exclusive to 2nd-Years
 - Class 2-A Chatroom: Private
 - Class 2-B Chatroom: Private
 - Class 2-C Chatroom: Private
 - Class 2-D Chatroom: Private
 - 1st-Year Chatroom: Exclusive to 3rd-Years
 - Class 3-A Chatroom: Private
 - Class 3-B Chatroom: Private
 - Class 3-C Chatroom: Private
 - Class 3-D Chatroom: Private
- (Only users with Creator Privileges have access to all Public and Private Chatrooms)
- Screenshots: Disabled
 - Proximity Lock: Enabled
 - Clear Cycle: Every 24 Hours, 10:00 AM

Membership Settings:

- Male: Invite-only
- Female: Visible to all

Author's Notes:

Other New Features:

- *Timestamps*
- *New Chatrooms*

With regard to the rules, the account you've registered for the group chat app is automatically and directly linked to your device, and your

device is directly linked to your digital ID. If your account is banned, you cannot create a new account to join that specific group chat even if you use another device. You would need a new ID, which is virtually impossible. Thus, once you make your account, it cannot be deleted even if you uninstall and reinstall the app.

Note that the app is mobile-exclusive. It cannot be opened on a personal computer.

Of course, the creator and moderators aren't all-powerful when it comes to banning. They must report their reason in detail before the disciplinary team behind the app (who are also school staff, since the app is exclusive in ANHS) thoroughly checks the logs to decide if the account is bannable.

The creator has also turned on a feature called **Proximity Lock**. This automatically pops out an option box where either one of the affected users will **choose** whether they'll disable their cameras or their chat apps. This option box appears when the app senses a powered device with an active chat app ID within close proximity. The app registers whatever option gets chosen first, and the chosen option will apply to both devices. The lock will automatically disappear once the users are far enough from each other. This would prevent users from colluding--taking pictures of the chat with their cameras to bypass the Anti-Screenshot feature.

The second-year and third-year chatrooms are mostly composed of female students who are unnamed in the story. Only two third-years; Ikari Momoko (3-B) and Ayase Natsu (3-C), are members who exist in the canon. Nazuna, Fuuka, Aoi, Yua, and the other female senpais aren't there (yet), so I decided to skip them and focus on the first-years.

However, please let me know if you're curious regardless. I can write what happened in their chatrooms if you want. Though it's just typical female upperclassmen admiring their kouhai.

Vol. 6: Chapter 1.1 - Changes, Big and Small

"I guess this was to be expected," I muttered softly while walking beside Horikita.

"Yes. The results were not that surprising," she replied.

"Most of the first-years didn't care that much, though."

The entire class finally arrived inside the gymnasium. After a few minutes of waiting, the entire school body was complete. The results of the student council's election were announced. The outgoing members were honored and the new ones were welcomed. It was a very important event.

"*Snore*... "

Well, not for a lot of us, apparently. Yamauchi, Ike, Hondou, and Miyamoto were barely conscious as they stood. I looked over and saw Onizuka and the others looking sleepy, too. The girls from Karuizawa's group also looked detached. C'mon now, guys. We're Class A, you know?

"President Horikita has some final remarks he'd like to share with you all."

The emcee stepped aside as Horikita Manabu stood on stage in front of the microphone. As a fellow Class A leader, Horikita watched resolutely, far cry from the Horikita of the past.

"I'm very proud to have led the student council for nearly two years. Apart from that, I'm also quite grateful. Thank you all very much."

His speech was brief and concise. No strong emotions could be felt, but his dignified figure exuded that of a leader who'd finally been dismissed from his obligations.

Of course, the ceremony was far from over. The new student council officers stood still on stage as the emcee took over once more.

"President Horikita, thank you for all your hard work. Now then, we'd like to welcome Nagumo Miyabi, second-year Class A student and the next student council president, to say a few words."

Nagumo walked calmly as he approached the podium. The new student council members watched him intently, especially Ichinose,

the sole first-year student who had joined.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Nagumo, from Class 2-A. President Horikita, I sincerely appreciate the strict yet kind guidance you've shown me. I'd like to express my respect for you, while also emphasizing what an honor it's been to serve alongside the most capable president in this school's history. You've exhibited the strongest leadership possible."

Nagumo bowed his head deeply toward Horikita's brother before facing the student body once more.

"Allow me to introduce myself again. My name is Nagumo Miyabi, and I will be assuming the position of Student Council President at the Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School. I sincerely look forward to working with all of you."

Contrary to his enigmatic behavior during the sports festival, Nagumo was filled with courtesy and a genteel appearance. Of course, I never expected his polite act to last long. His small, narrow smile shifted the atmosphere in an instant.

"This may be sudden, but for my first order of business, I pledge to change the term length for the student council members, as well as the general election method. The previous student council president held the general election in October instead of December each year. This arrangement, which saw the next generation of leaders move to their roles early, yielded mixed results. Therefore, the new student council has determined that it's time to take things a step further. From now on, the student council officers will have indefinite terms while attending school, so that they may serve continuously until graduation. At the same time, we'll annul both the current general election system and any restrictions on the student council's size. The council will constantly accept new officers. In other words, an excellent candidate may join the council no matter how many people are currently on it. Also, if someone is determined to be unfit for office, they can be removed by a majority vote. Please allow me to confirm this to all students, teachers, and student council members who served under the previous president. To bring this school to the future, I intend to thoroughly destroy the past."

Nagumo's remarks delivered with his pressing tone were tantamount to denying the achievements of the previous student council president, who was standing right behind him.

"I wanted to implement these changes at once. Unfortunately, a newly elected president must deal with many obligations and restrictions first." Nagumo glanced at the previous president, then immediately turned back to the student body. "A revolution is coming. Students with real ability will rise to the top, and students

without any will fall. I intend to turn this school into a true meritocracy, so please, give me everything you've got. I look forward to seeing what you can do."

I noticed that everyone had been captured by Nagumo's speech, for better or worse. Even the students who looked uninterested were intrigued. That said, most of them only took in the bare minimum amount of information, enough to comprehend how his ruling would immediately impact their school lives.

Everyone remained silent for the entirety of Nagumo's declarations. But after he finished his address, the second-years cheered with glee. Their excitement was a stark contrast to the crowd's noiselessness.

"Nagumo-senpai and the second-years were something, weren't they?" commented Kikyou.

Apart from the enthusiastic second-years, everything seemed relatively normal when we walked out of the gymnasium. That said, I felt a lot of eyes staring at me from a distance. Even as someone who'd been watched by other people his entire life, it was still a bit unsettling.

"Yeah," I replied without looking at her.

"Is everything okay, Kiyotaka-kun?" Kikyou noticed my lack of response and asked.

"Of course. I was just thinking about how Nagumo's new student council can affect our class."

"That's so you," she chuckled. "Well, nothing's concrete yet. We'll have to gather more information as we go."

"The first thing we need to worry about would be the midterm exams," said Horikita.

"Woah! I didn't notice you there, Horikita-san."

"Don't be ridiculous, Kushida-san. I've always been here," she replied.

After the sports festival, the dynamic between the students in our class changed ever so slightly. Kikyou and Horikita's exchanges aren't the friendliest, but at least they can talk without any useless pretense now.

The same goes for me. For example, I didn't really interact much with Ike's group, but the way they try to avoid talking to me has become more prevalent. Of course, I'm the only one who'd be able to notice.

"Yo, Kikyou-chan, Ayanokouji! We're gonna drop by the karaoke later. You guys wanna join?" Hondou asked.

Ike's attention was on Shinohara, while Yamauchi and Miyamoto started giving me the cold shoulder. Hondou was the only guy in

their group who was nice to me, probably because of our mutual closeness to Kikyou.

"Ah, sorry, Ryoutarou-kun. I made plans with Kokoro-chan and the others for later."

"It's the same with me and my friends," I replied.

Hondou smirked as his gaze moved towards Horikita.

"What about you, Horikita-san? Would you like to join us for karaoke?"

"Who's going to be there?" she asked.

The three of us were taken aback. Apart from agreeing to go, her reply was the last thing we expected to hear.

"U-Uh, Kanji and the others are gonna be there. Kikuchi and Mori are going, as well. And I think Sonoda and Ishikura are going if Karuizawa-san comes. Them among some others..."

"Hmm... I see." Horikita looked at Hondou before asking. "Before anything else, are you asking me genuinely, or was it a joke?"

Seeing Horikita's calm demeanor, Hondou relaxed and smiled.

"Both. I assumed Horikita-san would decline, so I jokingly asked for the fun of it. But if you're seriously considering your options, then please feel free to join us!"

"Is that so? Alright. I'll take you up on that offer, Hondou-kun."

"Sweet! I'll tell the others. I'm sure they'd be glad to hang out with you. Later!" Hondou ran off to reunite with his group.

"What...? I feel disrespected by your stares, you know?" Horikita called out.

"Ah, sorry, Horikita-san... I was just really surprised with what I just witnessed," said Kikyou.

"You're the one who said it yourself, Kushida-san. I should start socializing if I want to be an effective leader. At first, I thought spending leisure time with others is pointless for someone who doesn't seek company or *'fun'*. But I figured that wasn't entirely the case."

We continued walking to the classroom as a group of three. Kikyou and I carefully listened to what Horikita had to say.

"Ayanokouji-kun was able to deduce Class D's plan to harm Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun because of their fun little chat about romance. It all happened because they were well-acquainted with each other even though they're not, strictly speaking, friends. That's just one instance among many that I may not be aware of," said Horikita.

"In other words, you wish to make connections so you can potentially have more access to vital information?"

"That's what you've been doing since middle school, right, Kushida-san?"

Kikyou's eyes darkened for a split second, but given the number of people around us, she forced herself to appear normal.

"Please refrain from making comments like that, Horikita-san..." she whispered with a hardened smile.

"That was careless of me. I apologize," she nodded solemnly.

"Well, at least, you know that information is of utmost importance. The fact that you're trying to adjust to increase your methods of gathering information shows that you're on the right track," I said.

I spoke up, signaling Kikyou to quell her anger and get back on topic.

"The main reason why I accepted Hondou-kun's invitation was Kikuchi-kun and Mori-san's attendance. However, I might be able to gather so much more information just by observing their relationships and analyzing their conversations."

"Oh? What do you mean by that? Their relationships are fake and shallow so it's not like you'll find anything concrete. And you're going to analyze their conversations? All you'll hear are useless idle chats with no substance whatsoever. Do you think doing something so pointless would help you in any way?"

From an outsider's perspective, it looked like they were having a fun conversation given Kikyou's delighted expression. Of course, the truth was far from that. I could feel Kikyou's gloating smirk behind that innocent smile.

"You may be right, Kushida-san... I held the same opinions back then, and even now, I still think that I was right in some sense. But I want to build connections, no matter how shallow. I'm sure they'd prove useful to me if I can utilize them effectively."

The old Horikita would've agreed with everything Kikyou just said given her preconceived notions about interpersonal relationships, but things have changed. Horikita's point of view wasn't so simple anymore.

"Well, it's about time you wake up to that fact. It's pathetic that our so-called *"leader"* is an anti-social loner." Kikyou's angelic smile never budged, but the words coming out of her mouth became increasingly venomous.

"That's true," Horikita sighed, taking Kikyou's dismissals in stride.

She glanced at me before fixing her gaze forward. We reached the classroom and school went on as usual. But of course, things will change sooner or later.

Author's Notes:

From this chapter onwards, I will be profiling all named students one at a time. The order may vary, but that doesn't really matter. I just want you guys to be familiar with either the current state of development of a well-known character or the personality of an obscure or unfrequented character.

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Azuma Sana

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Female

Birthday: March 14th

Height: 162 cm (5'4")

Hair Color: Black

Eye Color: Blue

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: A-

Intelligence: B

Decision-Making: B

Physical Ability: C

Cooperativeness: B+

Personality: Azuma is a gentle girl to everyone else, yet a gremlin to her friends. She is one of the class's academic achievers despite her seemingly unintelligent teasing personality and laid-back attitude. She feels a certain camaraderie with Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and Matsushita Chiaki due to their strong innate desire to stay out of trouble. Her closest friend is Ichihashi Ruri, but she is also friends with Kushida Kikyuu and her group. Because of Sakura Airi's request to be her model, she becomes friends with the girls in the Ayanokouji Group. And like Hasebe Haruka, she isn't too fond of Karuizawa Kei and her group. However, she eventually becomes friends with the likes of Mori Nene, Matsushita Chiaki, Satou Maya, and Shinohara Satsuki. Azuma also strives to befriend Horikita Suzune.

Hobbies: Azuma's favorite pastime is watching drama shows on TV or online. She also likes to solve crossword puzzles. She and Ichihashi admire each other's fashion sense, and both of them strive to become as elegant and mature as their classmate, Matsushita Chiaki. Azuma likes pastries and cakes, and she prefers fizzy water over normal water. Her favorite color is blue and her favorite flavor is strawberry.

Abilities: Azuma is an intelligent girl. She isn't as serious about studying but can be on par with the likes of Horikita Suzune or Yukimura Teruhiko in terms of academic ability if she tried. That said, she's only average when it comes to sports. Azuma also has great

observational abilities that she utilizes to create accurate deductions and solutions to problems that she wants to solve.

Gallery:

(Volume 4: Chapter 1.1 - Prelude of a New Game)

(SS.24 - At the End of the Day)

Vol. 6: Chapter 2.1 - The Paper Shuffle

"Look at those serious faces. You're looking more and more like Class A," Chabashira-sensei smirked as she walked inside the classroom.

"I think any class would look nervous if their exam results are about to be announced, Sae-chan-sensei." Ike's remarks earned some anxious nods of agreement from the class.

"And we *are* Class A." Yamauchi's remarks earned some proud nods of agreement from the class.

"I suppose that's true," she replied. "The same rules were applied, just like your midterm and final exams during the first semester. The calculated average score of all four classes will be divided by two and determine your passing grade."

"What's the passing grade this time, Sensei?" asked Hondou.

"I'm guessing it's 40 again," commented Miyamoto.

Back during the midterms of the first semester, the passing grade was 42 points. This was due to the per-class average score being around 83 points. In the individual class average rankings, our class took the top, surpassing even Sakayanagi's class, but that's because of the strategy we used. However, the true gap in our classes' academic abilities was revealed during the final exam. The per-class average score decreased to around 80 points, and our passing grade was only 40 points which was a good thing for those who tried to avoid getting expelled. However, we ranked third behind Ichinose's Class C, and we were head-to-head with Ryuen's Class D, barely beating them. It's not explicitly announced like special exam results, but our class average rankings affect how many class points we gain after written exams.

This time, for the midterms of the second semester, things didn't really change. Sakayanagi's class took the lead as usual with Ichinose's class following behind them. We were in third place, right in front of Ryuen's Class D. It didn't look good considering we were Class A, but that's just the reality of things. The class won't suddenly become as competent in academics as the original Class A after one semester.

"You're right, Miyamoto. The passing grade hadn't changed since last semester's final exam. Anyone who scores below 40 points in any subject will be expelled. The bonuses and penalties from the

sports festival have also taken effect. If anyone's score exceeded one hundred points, then the school will just treat them as having achieved a perfect score," Chabashira-sensei explained.

Ijuuin and Professor wore stiff expressions. Ike, Yamauchi, and the other unathletic students were the same. As the ones who had the worst results, they were bound to get hit by the penalty.

"Good thing we only needed to pay some private points..." sighed Ike.

According to the rules, you'll have to pay 1000 private points after placing last in an individual competition. Ike and the others' exam scores weren't touched since they had more than enough private points to pay for the penalties. However, this won't apply to someone like Professor.

Ten worst-scoring students were chosen for each year. Four of them came from our class, Class A, three from Sakayanagi's Class B, two from Ichinose's Class C, and only one student from Ryuuen's Class D. Professor was one of them, so he needed to score ten points higher in each subject just to compensate for the deductions. The others were Ijuuin, Airi, and Inogashira.

Airi could've scored enough points in the sports festival to survive, but her injury sealed the deal. She worked extra hard for her studies because of it.

"This is quite troublesome for you, Professor." Ijuuin showed his concern. As someone who scores highly during exams, he didn't have to worry as much as the others.

"Indeed, Wataru-dono... I don't think I failed in any subject, but it is nerve-wracking."

Chabashira-sensei posted the results on the board as we watched with bated breath.

"Woah-!"

"Ohh!"

Most of our classmates shot their gazes at the bottom of the list. They probably expected Ken's name to be at the bottom as usual, but of course, this wasn't the case. The first two names they saw belonged to Yamauchi and Ike.

"Oh crap, dude! I can't believe I got the lowest score!" cried Yamauchi.

"Damn it!" followed Ike.

Fortunately, none of them got a failing score. Above them were Inogashira, Satou, and Professor. Well, it didn't really matter since the scores of the next ten students or so weren't that much greater in comparison.

"Nice! I did it! New personal best!" Ken celebrated.

"Hold your party poppers, Kencchin. Your scores were increased

by the point rewards, remember?"

"Ah-! You're right..."

"Ken-kun still did a great job, though. I don't think he'll rank at the bottom even if he didn't have the point rewards."

"You're more amazin', Airi. Even though yer scores were deducted, ya still managed to exceed the passin' grade with some room to spare." Ken blushed slightly, scratching his cheek as he returned some compliments to Airi.

"The overall average for everyone has increased this time, apart from those who had incurred some penalties. That said, it is a fact that all of you had passed. Congratulations."

The class was slowly starting to get used to Chabashira-sensei's warmer attitude.

"I'll let you digest the results for a few minutes. We'll move on to some important discussions right after."

Some students stood up and walked to the front, while some approached their friends to chat about the results.

"I guess we got lucky. The test was made up of relatively simple questions," muttered Horikita.

She was right. Compared to the final exam last semester, this one was a little bit easier. In fact, some of the questions were too easy. Horikita and the other top students even had perfect scores in some subjects.

That said, the efforts of the study groups cannot be understated. The tutors went the extra mile, and the students reciprocated their efforts. If they keep this pace up, we can slowly close the gap between our class's academic abilities and the two former upper classes.

"Woah, you're in the top twenty, Ryoutarou!" exclaimed Ike.

"Seriously?! You passed so much of the class!" followed Yamauchi.

"Gah-! I almost made it, too!" cried Miyamoto.

"Our progress is normal. You're just slacking off too much, Haruki, Kanji." Hondou shrugged.

"Congratulations, Hondou-kun, Miyamoto-kun. You've improved a lot." Hirata voiced his praises towards Hondou and Miyamoto.

I'm sure he felt proud as their tutor.

"I'm sorry, Kanji-kun, Haruki-kun... If only I was a better tutor..." Kikyou bowed her head in apology.

The class felt bad seeing this. Ike and Yamauchi panicked as a result.

"I-I-It's not your fault, Kikyou-chan! We're the ones at fault, you know?!"

"Y-Yeah! Ryoutarou was right! We were just slacking off! Your

teachings were more than enough!"

While that was happening, I took a light novel volume from my bag and approached Professor.

"Good job on not failing, Professor. I finished this last night. It was a great read."

"Ohh, why thank you, Ayanokouji-dono. My lack of physique is truly a shame. I do apologize."

"You don't have to worry about that too much," I replied. "That said, your past two exam results have been significantly lower than your midterms back in the first semester. You got perfect scores across the board at that time."

"Fufun~. That was an inevitability." He fixed his glasses with a smirk. "My pattern recognition and memorization capabilities are impeccable. I didn't have to study the actual lessons since the answers were directly given to me. I just needed to copy all of them from my brain to the test paper. That's why I got a perfect score."

"That's an amazing talent," I said.

"I know!" All of a sudden, Professor's elation dramatically shifted to seriousness and melancholy. "However, it's not invincible. I cannot apply this talent of mine to something I dislike. Perfect memorization requires focus. Even if I study hard, I simply cannot store as much information unless it interests me. My brain automatically filters them out."

"Ohh, so that explains your extremely high score on Japanese History."

"Why, of course. I found the era of war very intriguing," he nodded. "What about you, Ayanokouji-dono? Your rank had been slowly going down."

"It's not that surprising. I'm actually starting to struggle now. It won't take long before I drop below the top ten."

"Surely, you jest." Professor took my statement as a joke and laughed.

If Horikita heard what I said, I'm sure she'd glare at me.

It didn't take long before Chabashira-sensei stood from where she sat. The class scrambled their way back to their seats. Her raven black ponytail swayed left and right almost hypnotically as she walked. Chabashira-sensei's alluring and enigmatic presence silenced the room. Soon, she stopped beside Hirata's seat.

"Well then, are you satisfied with your results?" she asked. "What do you think, Hirata?"

"The class did their best. I'm sure not everyone was satisfied with their individual results, but that means they can still improve."

"Good answer." She continued walking, passing through the aisles between our desks. "Right now, the heart of the matter is that you

all passed. In the three years I've taught in this school, no Class D made it this far without any dropouts, let alone reach Class A. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that you're the best class in this school's history if we just look at your achievements thus far."

Chabashira-sensei's serious tone didn't contain any hint of mockery. Her genuine evaluation made the class feel proud.

"Since you've been around for a while, I want to ask you something. What do you think of this school?" Chabashira-sensei stopped beside Ike. "I'd like to hear your honest evaluation."

"Well, I guess... it's a good school. If you do well, you can get tons of spending money. The food's tasty, and the rooms are clean," Ike replied, counting the things he listed on his fingers. "You can buy games and stuff. Plus, there are movies and karaoke. And the girls are cute."

That last part wasn't really the school's doing, though.

His answer was met with a solemn nod.

"Um, did I say something wrong...?" he asked nervously.

"No," Chabashira-sensei shook her head lightly. "From a student's perspective, this school is quite a paradise. Even as a teacher, I feel that it's almost excessively lavish. It treats its students so well that it almost defies common sense."

She paced back to another aisle and arrived beside Kikyou.

"How about you, Kushida? Do you like this school?"

"Yes," she nodded with a big smile. "I've made lots of friends, and every day is fun."

"Don't you feel anxious, knowing that you could be expelled if you happen to make a single mistake?"

"I do, but whenever I see everyone coming together, those feelings disappear."

The class felt elated after hearing Kikyou's response. She easily increased everyone's morale even further.

Chabashira-sensei returned to the front, behind the podium. It seemed as though she was trying to confirm something, but I didn't understand what. Maybe she wanted to get a better sense of the class's current state of mind.

"I'm sure you're all aware of the upcoming quiz next week," she said.

With the atmosphere shifting back to normal, our classmates donned somber expressions. We were constantly reminded about the upcoming quiz by the teachers. We wouldn't be able to forget about it, even if we wanted.

"It'll be in preparation for the second semester's final exam. I'm sure you're still recovering from your previous exam, but you don't have to worry too much."

"What do you mean, Sensei?" asked Horikita.

"There will be one hundred test questions on the test for a total of one hundred points. However, the quiz will have a lower level of difficulty."

"Woah, seriously?"

"Ahh, I thought I'd need to study a lot again..."

"I can finally rest..."

The class was overjoyed. It seems like we could take it easy.

"Don't celebrate too soon. The results will have an enormous impact on your next final exam," she added.

As soon as they heard that, everyone started to look confused.

"Would you please elaborate, Sensei?" Ryuuko raised her hand and asked in chorus.

"Why, of course, Nishimura. The school has decided that the results of this next quiz will help determine which students will partner up in class."

"Partner..." Matsushita looked at Horikita. Horikita nodded in response. "Sensei... This is going to be a special exam, isn't it?"

"It seems like you're starting to pick things up more naturally," Chabashira-sensei replied. "You're right, Matsushita. Your final exam will be a special exam, and you will be taking it with a partner. There will be eight subjects with fifty questions each for a total of four hundred questions. Each subject is worth one hundred points."

Horikita and the others started noting down the key details.

"There are two ways for you to fail the exam. If the pair's combined score goes under sixty in even one subject, then the school will expel both students. For example, let's say Ike and Hirata were partners. Even if Ike scored zero points, they'd be safe as long as Hirata scored sixty."

Everyone gasped. With an excellent partner, this will be an easy test.

"And the other one...?" Hondou asked, probably sensing that there would be a catch.

"You must secure a certain overall score. Even if you get sixty points or more in each individual subject, failing to meet this overall score will cause the pair to fail, and consequently, be expelled. This overall score will be the combined scores of both partners. The school hasn't determined the exact score just yet, but in the past years, it's been around seven hundred points."

With two people working together, you'd need a minimum average score of 43.75 points in every subject. Even excellent students like Horikita and Yukimura could be in trouble, depending on their partners.

"The final exam will be held over two days, with four subjects per day. In the event that someone is absent, due to poor health, the school will investigate the absence's legitimacy. If it's confirmed to be unavoidable, the student will receive points based on a rough estimate of what they would've earned given past test results. However, should the school find that an absent student didn't have sufficient reason to miss the exam, they will receive a score of zero points for all tests missed," Chabashira-sensei explained. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions, but put them on hold for now. The rest of the details will be explained at a later date."

Soft murmurs reverberated throughout the room. It seems as though the class was already used to the pressure of taking on a special exam.

"I certainly admire the attitude you take when special exams are involved. But if I can offer you a piece of advice, do not assume that you understand how this school works just because you've made it past the first semester. You're just getting started. In the future, you'll face countless exams far more difficult than those you face now. And I don't just mean that in an academic sense."

"P-Please don't say such terrifying things, Sensei..." said Miyamoto.

"I'm just telling you the truth," she sighed. "In the past, this special exam was called the 'Paper Shuffle'. One or two pairs are usually expelled, and most of them are from Class D. Obviously, you're no longer Class D, and your academic abilities have certainly risen to surpass that of the current Class D. But as long as your foundations are not solid enough, the risks won't disappear."

The class's morale might've taken a hit, but they needed to hear what Chabashira-sensei had to say.

That said, I wonder why this special exam was called "Paper Shuffle" in the first place...?

"The school will expel any failed partners without exception. This isn't a mere threat. You can even ask an upperclassman to confirm how serious my words are. I assume you've built some connections with them after the sports festival."

"So no matter what, we can't afford to fail, huh...?" muttered Hirata.

"Exactly. And just to remind all of you. Cheating is strictly forbidden. Anyone who cheats will immediately be disqualified and expelled along with their partner. I'm sure already know that since this rule applies to all midterm and final exams."

Ordinary high schools usually punish cheaters with automatic zeros for all subjects. At worst, they could be suspended, and at best, they get a stern warning-- a slap on the wrist. Obviously, this

school wasn't an ordinary one.

"After I get the quiz results, I'll tell you how the all-too-important partnerships will be decided."

I glanced at Horikita and saw that she turned to me almost at the exact same time. She probably figured something out already. Well, it's not like I'm going to do anything even if she didn't.

"If you get partnered with the student at the bottom, won't you be in deep trouble?" asked Ken.

"Wha-! Sudou's humiliating me! I'm going to study hard and turn things around!" Yamauchi cried.

"Sure, dude. You're all talk, anyway." Ken scoffed and shrugged his words off.

"Ughh...! Damn it, this guy!" Yamauchi couldn't reply back.

"One more aspect of this final exam will challenge you," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Another thing...?"

Our classmates were agitated but continued listening.

"I'm sure you're wondering why the exam is called 'Paper Shuffle'. The reason for that would be this final mechanic. The school will ask you to create your own questions to appear on the final exam. They'll use the questions you come up with for one of the other three classes. That means classes will be able to attack one another, so to speak. The school will compare your class's overall score to the overall score of the class that received your test questions. The class that scores higher will take 50 class points from the losing class," she explained.

To sum up, pairs needed to score above seven hundred points in total while scoring at least sixty points on each subject to pass. Failing would result in expulsion. Furthermore, our class's overall score had to exceed the overall score of the class we'll create test questions for.

"So if we succeed in surpassing the class we attack and defending against our attacker, we could gain as much as 100 class points? But what if it turns into a class one-on-one?" asked Horikita.

"The winner would still receive 100 class points if that's the case. And although unlikely, there will be no changes in class points in the event of a draw," Chabashira-sensei answered.

"Sensei, the submitted questions will be regulated, right? It wouldn't be fair if someone includes a question about something that we haven't learned yet," said Hondou.

"Of course. The school will evaluate the questions you create. If they're deemed invalid, then they will be revised. We'll ensure that each class submits fair questions."

"Creating four hundred questions, huh? That'll make for a pretty

tight schedule," said Hirata.

"If you don't complete the questions in time, certain measures are in place to help you. After the submission deadline passes, the school will utilize its own premade questions. However, please keep in mind that those questions will be easier."

If we wanted to maximize our chances of winning, we had to create our own questions no matter what. Of course, someone would have to bear the burden of the work it would require.

"You may consult teachers and students from other classes, and you can use the internet. Only a few restrictions are in place. The important thing is that the school accepts the questions," she explained. "On the day before the quiz, each class will choose another class to compete against, and I will report that request to my superiors. If another class makes the same choice, representatives will draw lots. However, if there are no duplicate nominations, your choice of class will be honored. That's all for the preliminary explanation. The rest is up to you."

And with that, Chabashira-sensei left the classroom, and classes ended for the day.

Author's Notes:

*You can check **Classroom of the Elite: Vol. 1: Chapter 17.2 - Foothold** to see when Sae taught them how the passing grades are calculated. But in layman's terms, each class's average scores are calculated to determine how many class points they earn for the written exams. They then calculate the passing grade by averaging the average scores of each class and dividing the value by two.*

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Ishikura Kayoko

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Female

Birthday: February 15th

Height: 158 cm (5'2")

Hair Color: Dark Brown

Eye Color: Amber

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: B+

Intelligence: B-

Decision-Making: B-

Physical Ability: D

Cooperativeness: B-

Personality: *Ishikura is a social yet introverted girl. She is easily inspired and influenced by others, typically those who resemble the best traits of her big brother. For example, she was captivated by Kushida Kikyou's charisma at the start of school, so she befriended her. Eventually, however, she turned to admire Karuizawa Kei and her dominant leader-like personality. Her initial friend group was Kushida Kikyou's group, but she eventually shifted to be closer and more comfortable with Karuizawa Kei's group. She is also a considerably diligent student, thanks to her big brother's influence. She is studious, but her friends know that she's bad at teaching, so they only occasionally ask her to tutor them.*

Hobbies: *Ishikura likes stuffed teddy bears. She cuddles with them when she sleeps. Her weakest subject is English, but ever since she started watching foreign English dubbed shows, her English skills had significantly improved. She was influenced by her big brother's fondness for fashion, and even the most fashionable girls in her class like Karuizawa Kei and Matsushita Chiaki would ask for her opinions. Her favorite food is tonkatsu.*

Abilities: *Ishikura's innate academic intelligence had always been above average ever since she was a kid. She is very decisive as long as there is no one actively trying to influence her decision at the moment. Her physical abilities might be low, but she is very cooperative. She can also handle organizational stuff with ease.*

Gallery:

(Ishikura Kayoko in middle school)

Image could be found on Pinterest. Please comment the original source, if you know.

Vol. 6: Chapter 2.2 - Tutors' Meeting

"We'll have a meeting. Would you like to join us?" Horikita approached me as I grabbed my bag.

"Sure," I replied.

The first suggestion for the meeting place was Palette, courtesy of Karuizawa, but it seems like there were going to be a lot of us. So, we opted for the usual karaoke place.

Horikita and I decided to walk together while having a little chat.

"What do you think?" she asked. "About the exam..."

"It's gonna be a bit tricky, for sure-- and a lot of work for the tutors."

"That's true..."

"We'll have to create our own test questions. Does that ring a bell to you?"

Seeing that I was appraising her understanding, Horikita thought seriously before answering.

"You're talking about the participation table during the festival, aren't you...?"

I nodded.

"The risk of having a traitor is still there-- is what you're trying to say..." Horikita had a grave look on her face.

"You've talked about it with Hirata, haven't you? What did you guys decide to do?"

"We didn't agree on anything conclusive just yet. There are a lot of things to consider."

"Personally, I think you should tell everyone that you found the traitor."

"What?" Horikita was surprised by my take on the matter. "But doing that would cause panic and unease inside the class..."

"Quite the opposite, actually. Everyone had pretty much deduced that a traitor gave away the class's participation table for the sports festival. If you keep things the way they are, our classmates will start doubting each other."

"I see... So that's why Hirata-kun didn't like the idea of permanently keeping things under the rug."

"Of course, you have to reassure them that the traitor only betrayed the class because they were cornered by Sakayanagi."

"That's the best way to do it. But it's strange... If Hirata-kun had

the same opinion as you, why didn't he tell me immediately?"

"Who knows? As you said, there are many things to consider."

"I suppose that's true..."

It would be the best course of action for Horikita and the class. And of course, that also goes for me.

Horikita and I waited near the karaoke place until the others came. The members of the meeting were the seven tutors, including me, along with Karuizawa and Ryuuko. There were nine of us, in total. The meeting officially started after our drinks came in.

"Thank you for coming," said Horikita. "Firstly, I would like to hear your opinions on this exam."

"I think it's going to be a bit troublesome considering the pairing system," answered Matsushita.

"Not only that. I'm sure the test questions will be extremely tough if we consider the fact that fellow students are going to make them," followed Yukimura.

"Yukimura-kun is right," nodded Ryuuko. "Since it's a competition, they will most likely try to get us with tricky wording. A straightforward question can appear unsolvable, and vice versa."

"But couldn't we just do the same to them?" mused Karuizawa. "Like, if they're gonna make it hard for us, let's just make it harder for *them*. Right, Yousuke-kun?"

"Yes, we'll be sure to give them everything we've got."

"Thank you for giving me your thoughts," said Horikita. "That should be enough for now. The main reason for this meeting would be to get our priorities in order. I think the first thing we need to talk about would be the pairing system."

"I noticed that Chabashira-sensei gave us hints about it, right Mii-chan?" Kikyou addressed the shy Mii-chan, giving her the chance to talk.

"Yes... She told us that the upcoming quiz will have a big effect on how we'll get paired," she said.

"Wang-san is right. This means that a selection method is in place. If that's the case, then failing to figure it out might be disastrous." Horikita opened her bag and took out a notebook.

"There are a number of possibilities that I can think of," said Yukimura. "They might pair students who have similar scores or something more balanced like extreme to median pairs."

"They might also pair students who got the right answers to the ones who got them wrong," added Matsushita.

"But isn't there another big clue to figuring it out?" Ryuuko asked, looking at Horikita.

"Exactly. Chabashira-sensei told us that only one or two pairs

have dropped out from Class D in the past," Horikita explained. "For example, if the school pairs students with similar scores, then more than five pairs would most likely score below the aggregate passing grade. At least ten students would drop out as a result."

"And since that's not the case, the pairings must've been pretty balanced." Hirata turned to Yukimura, who suggested that possibility.

"Extreme to median pairs, huh?" he muttered.

"What does that mean?" asked Karuizawa.

"Extreme pairs are pairs of students who got the lowest score and the highest score. They are then followed by the pairing of the students who got the second-lowest score and second-highest score, slowly going towards the middle until you get to the median pairs whose scores are somewhere in the middle."

"Ohh, I see! You really know your stuff, Yousuke-kun!"

"Given our low class average, the more average you are, the more you'd be in trouble."

"Matsushita-san is right. That's why manipulating how we will be paired is a must," said Horikita. "For the short quiz, the school must've been hinting at its level since the midterms. If the questions were as easy as they've shown us, I don't think controlling our results would be a problem."

Everyone leaned forward as Horikita presented her notes.

"I've already thought about the balanced pairings in the classroom and have devised potential pairings depending on our academic abilities. First, I would like everyone to analyze the current rankings based on the midterms earlier."

"Going by theory, the pairs must have a combined placement number of 41. In other words, we'll have to cross-stitch this list." Yukimura examined the rankings.

"So... What that means is you'll pair up with Yamauchi-kun, right? Then Horikita-san will pair up with Ike-kun, and so on," said Karuizawa.

"Yes, that's right. I've already prepared a temporary list of pairs going forward," Horikita nodded, flipping to the next page.

Everyone made wondering noises as they inspected the list. Karuizawa and I looked at each other seeing how our names were paired up. When our eyes met, however, she only gave me a wry smile before quickly turning away.

"Horikita, the placements and pairings don't match for Mori and some other students." Yukimura pointed out the inconsistency on the table.

"I... would like to give some context to that," she said.

Hirata, who seemed to know what she was going to say next, put

a hand on her shoulder.

"Horikita-san, are you sure about this...?" he asked.

"Yes. I believe telling the people here would be for the best. They must have their doubts already. Of course, telling *everyone* is a different story."

Seeing Horikita's resolute expression, Hirata decided to withdraw.

"What are you talking about, Horikita?" Yukimura narrowed his eyes.

"I'm sure all of you can remember how badly we lost during the sports festival. Our preparations were optimized to the brim, and everyone was collectively satisfied with how our participation table turned out. However, we didn't even stand a chance."

The air suddenly felt heavy. Yukimura and the others were smart enough to know where Horikita was going with this.

"You're talking about the participation table, aren't you, Horikita-san?" asked Matsushita.

"I mean, it seemed more obvious the more we think about it," followed Azuma.

"Yes. To confirm your suspicions, someone from our class did indeed leak our participation table."

It goes without saying that their reactions weren't pleasant.

"So we have a traitor in our class, huh...? Who is it, Horikita? And how is it related to the shift in Mori and the others' pairings?" Yukimura asked with a strong tone.

"For now, I would like you to listen carefully. The only ones who know about this are Hirata-kun, Ayanokouji-kun, Karuizawa-san, Kushida-san, and myself. However, I will be disclosing the details to all of you today."

Yukimura and the others turned silent, waiting for Horikita to tell the story.

"The traitor was... Kikuchi-kun," she said.

Everyone gasped in shock.

"There's no way..."

"Kikuchi-kun...?"

"Eita... is the traitor...?"

"Before you make your judgments, I would like to clear his name first. While Kikuchi-kun did leak the participation table to Class B, he didn't do it willingly. He was cornered. Sakayanagi-san, the leader of Class B, held Mori-san hostage."

"Mori? But how?" asked Yukimura.

"Sakayanagi-san and another Class B student managed to stage Mori-san into 'committing' violence. Of course, she didn't really do anything, but the fabricated evidence that the other side holds was meticulously crafted to trap Mori-san."

Horikita proceeded to tell them the details about the so-called "video evidence".

"Kikuchi-kun couldn't ask us for help. Sakayanagi-san threatened to spread the video instead if they told anyone about it before the sports festival ended."

"That's horrible..." said Mii-chan.

"Damn it... This was the same thing they did with Ike and the others..." muttered Yukimura.

"We have no guarantee, but Sakayanagi-san let Mori-san and Kikuchi-kun delete the video. They've cut ties with them, so I don't think Kikuchi-kun would betray us anymore."

"I also trust Kikuchi... As his tutor, I can confidently say that he's not the type of person who would betray the class for his own gain," said Yukimura.

"To prevent our classmates from doubting each other, we'll inform everyone about the existence of the traitor and their motives for betraying the class. However, Kikuchi-kun and Mori-san's names will be kept hidden," said Horikita.

"Well, I'm sure the class will understand since it's not like the traitor was on the enemy's side. But on the flip side, everyone might start worrying about getting blackmailed," commented Azuma.

"Alright, alright. That can wait for another time. What does Kikuchi and Mori's involvement in the leak have to do with the pairings?" asked Yukimura.

"This list is a bit more similar to the top twenty list during the first final exam. Kikuchi-kun's placing is fine, but as you can see, Mori-san is usually in the top eighteen. Unfortunately, the stress of what happened diminished her performance a lot. I don't want to discount Hondou-kun's improvement, but I think pairing him with someone from the bottom twenty is still too risky."

"But as you said, Mori's performance had diminished. Wouldn't it be riskier to put her on the top twenty?"

"I don't think that'll be the case this time around, but we can't ignore that possibility."

"I can vouch for Horikita putting Mori on a higher placement," I said before looking at her. "You managed to talk to her last time with Kikuchi, right?"

Horikita nodded.

"I think her mental state has gotten better over the past week, but Yukimura-kun still has a point. That said, I think we can just improve and finalize the list at a later date," she answered.

Not rushing was a great decision by Horikita, and the others agreed. It'll give them more time to process every single detail.

"Next on the agenda would be our opponent." Horikita signaled to

Hirata.

"We'll have to decide which class to nominate." Hirata put his notes on the table.

"Class D would be the obvious choice, no?" suggested Ryuuko.

"Yes. Ideally, we should nominate Class D as our opponent. Compared to Class B and C, their academic abilities are noticeably lower. And since we started having proper study groups since the first semester, we've cemented our place ahead of them, too."

"But as Chabashira-sensei had said, it's possible for our nomination to get overruled. Since Class D is the least capable class, it's not wrong to assume that the other classes will nominate them as well," said Matsushita.

"Should that happen, we'll have to draw lots... I don't really feel at ease relying on luck," Azuma commented.

"Knowing who Class D will nominate would help a lot," said Yukimura. "But then again, it's not like our chances would increase even if Ryuuen chooses our class."

Hirata began to draw a hypothetical outcome of the match-ups.

"That looks rough..."

"We can outscore Class D if they target us, but we'll have to make questions for Ichinose-san's class..."

"There are a lot of smart students in her class, let alone Sakayanagi-san's class..."

"Still, choosing any class other than Class D wouldn't be logical..."

"Yukimura-kun is right. This isn't something that we can really control. I also think that choosing Class D is the best option. If we get contested and lose the lottery, then it wasn't our fate to face off against them."

"Yousuke-kun is right! Let's just pick Class D and move on with it," Karuizawa said, clinging to Hirata's arm.

"Alright. We can end the meeting right here. After we discuss everything with the class, it'll be time to make some changes to the study groups. A number of groups will dissolve and combine with others because some tutors will be assigned in creating the test questions," explained Horikita.

Everyone agreed with this idea. It was the most efficient solution available to us at the moment.

And with that, the meeting was concluded. We decided to use up our remaining time to have some fun at the karaoke.

Bonus:

Meanwhile, while the others were having a serious meeting.

"By the way, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Hm?"

"Do you like surprises?" Kikyou suddenly asked a strange question.

"Hmm... I haven't really thought about it, but if I were to choose, I'd lean a tiny bit toward a 'Yes'."

If everything goes according to how you anticipate it to, then life would be very boring.

"Ohh, I see. Changing topics, then. Do you like it when we have get-togethers like this?"

"Well... I honestly prefer to be with lesser people. I also don't mind being alone."

"I see. I see," Kikyou nodded understandingly.

Beside her, Mii-chan did nothing but listen. I was about to ask why she was asking all these questions but...

"Mmm! This iced tea is really good, Kiyotaka-kun. It has the perfect sweetness," said Kikyou. "Mii-chan, wanna give it a try?"

Sharing drinks, huh? This is truly a scene of youth and friendship.

"Oh, sure! You can try mine, too. It's just a normal soda, though," Mii-chan turned to me and asked. "What did you order, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Oolong tea," I replied after drinking from my glass. "Want some?"

"C-Can I?!"

Mii-chan was surprised. I thought I was included in the circle of drink sharers when she asked me about my drink. Did I misinterpret her words? That would be incredibly embarrassing.

No... Maybe I can just offer mine as well? When push comes to shove, I just have to stay calm and double down. Continuing this cycle of sharing will keep the ball rolling. Since Mii-chan is a nice girl, it's possible that she's just thinking about an equivalent exchange.

"Why not? I'll try your soda if you're worried about giving back."

"Well... That's..."

"Geez, Kiyotaka-kun. Stop making Mii-chan nervous." Kikyou called out to me with a pout.

"Huh? Nervous? Ahh..."

I see. Like Airi, Mii-chan would probably be nervous about some random person asking to share drinks with her. That goes double when it's someone from the opposite sex, like me. I was careless. I was too caught up in joining the circle of youth and friendship.

I should probably apologize.

"Sorry. You can forget about what I said, Mii-chan."

"U-Um... It's not like I'm... not okay with it..." she replied meekly.

"You're really kind, but it's my fault. You're a girl, after all. It wouldn't be proper for me to ask you to share a drink with a guy that you're not close with."

After hearing that, Mii-chan's brows furrowed. I don't know why, but she seemed displeased.

"Then... If Ayanokouji-kun shares drinks with me, would that make us close?" she asked.

That was unexpected, and she got it backwards. Being close friends was the prerequisite, not the drinks. But my intuition tells me that that's not what matters here.

Alright. Be confident, me. Follow your hunch.

"Maybe...? Would you like that? Us being close friends, I mean?"

"Yes! I would like to be close friends with Ayanokouji-kun," Mii-chan replied with a smile.

We tried each other's drinks after that, including Kikyou's. It seems like I gained another person whom I could call a "close friend".

Speaking of Kikyou, I felt like her angelic smile looked demonic the entire time-- at least in my eyes. It's probably on par with Horikita's glare. Maybe even scarier.

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Nishimura Ryuuko

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Female

Birthday: June 5th

Height: 163 cm (5'4")

Hair Color: Black (with violet undertones)

Eye Color: Violet

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: A-

Intelligence: B+

Decision-Making: B-

Physical Ability: C+

Cooperativeness: B+

Personality: Nishimura is a book-smart girl with a gentle and mature demeanor. She tends to act childlike when she's around the person she likes but retains her mature demeanor on the outside. She is close friends with Kushida Kikyou's group, and she gets along well with Ichihashi Ruri

and Azuma Sana. Nishimura is a diligent student, helping her friend Wang Mei-yu with her tutoring duties. She eventually becomes a tutor herself and is a very good teacher. That said, even with her gentle nature, she doesn't feel comfortable around girls like Karuizawa Kei or boys like Yamauchi Haruki. Nishimura also feels secretly competitive with girls who are close to Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

Hobbies: Nishimura likes listening to music and she's been a great singer ever since she was a child. Her favorite genre of music (as of late) is Japanese Math Rock. In high school, she tries to learn the guitar with the help of Okitani Kyouzuke, the most skilled guitarist in the class. She likes singing in karaoke and is often invited by her friends so they can hear her sing. In terms of food, Nishimura's favorite is unagi, especially during summer. She can also tolerate the heat more than the cold. Her favorite color is aqua and aquamarine.

Abilities: Nishimura is one of the academic pillars of Class A. Her singing voice is also among the best in her year, and her rhythmic accuracy is unmatched. She is an empath but has gained the ability to control her tendencies to overthink negatively, to a certain degree. This is why her level-headedness is trusted and relied on by Horikita Suzune and Hirata Yousuke, and her opinions and assessment about people weigh just as much as perceptive social elites like Matsushita Chiaki and Kushida Kikyou. Her one main weakness would be her inability to stay calm when her close friends and romantic interest are in grave danger.

Gallery:

(SS.21 - Nishimura Ryuuko: A Place Next to Him)

(Vol. 4.5: Chapter 5.1 - In Good Hands)

(Vol. 4.5: Chapter 10.1 - Go Along)

Vol. 6: Chapter 3.1 - Inching Closer

"I want information on Kushida Kikyô. It doesn't matter what you get. Ask around and report everything to me. There's no need to be secretive about it. In fact, I don't want you to be secretive about it."

Ryuuen's tyrannical tone left no room for arguments. The boys looked nervous. A lot of them had a crush on Kushida, so her impression of them would drop if she finds out that they were suddenly *"asking about her"*.

"Kukuku. Don't look so scared now. I know you don't wanna look suspicious and creepy. You can use my name if the people you're asking start questioning your motives."

Quiet sighs of relief could be felt as soon as Ryuuen said that.

"It's time for a counterattack. We'll strike through the center of Class A and crush them from there."

Ryuuen's grin unsettled his classmates. They knew someone was bound to get hurt. However, they neither wanted nor tried to stop him. At the end of the day, Class D was still in the race to the top because of him.

After the rest of the class left, only a select few students remained inside the classroom.

"What exactly is the plan, Ryuuen-san?" Ishizaki asked nervously.

"Kushida-shi... A very high-profile target," Kaneda said. "Is there something about her that we should take notice of?"

"Kukuku. The pieces are slowly getting in place for my true goal. Going after Kikyô is just a means to an end."

Crushing Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. They already knew what he wanted.

"I can roughly tell how you want things to end up. But will trying to find out information on Kushida even work?"

"What do you think?" Ryuuen sneered. "Would I do something so pointless without any reason?"

"Tch." Ibuki clicked her tongue as Ryuuen mocked her thinking. "I guess not. But at least tell us what you have in mind. Stop acting like a smartass for once."

"Watch your tone, Ibuki. You've done nothing but fail, remember?" His smile turned into a piercing glare. "You have abilities, so I keep giving you another chance. If you want to act

high and mighty in front of me, then stop being useless or I'll get rid of you myself."

Ibuki couldn't respond. She knew, more than anyone, how much she'd failed.

"I've learned something juicy about Class A's angel. I don't really care if the class gets any information from asking around. I just want Kikyou to feel my presence-- how I'm inching closer and closer toward something she desperately wants to hide."

"Something she wants to hide...? What would Kushida-chan--" Ishizaki looked visibly confused.

"Did you really believe that her goody-two-shoes act was genuine?" Ibuki raised an eyebrow.

"I-I mean this is Kushida-chan we're talking about!"

Kaneda narrowed his eyes after hearing Ibuki's words.

"Ryuuen-shi... Are you suggesting that she's hiding a different personality behind her friendly veneer?"

"What else could he mean?" Ibuki rolled her eyes.

"That... is certainly possible. But even then, how would we go about exposing this truth to everyone? If we're spearheading this plan with Ryuuen-shi's name on the front, then I don't think the students would be swayed. Given the difference in public image, this will likely be passed off as nothing but a malicious rumor."

"Kuku. You don't get it, Kaneda. It's not about exposing the truth. It's about the *idea* of exposing the truth. And besides, I still have one more piece to find before my plan is completed." Ryuuen's thin smile exuded absolute confidence. "We have the points ready. Buying *that information* shouldn't be a problem. I've already talked about this with Sakagami-sensei... and Chabashira-sensei."

After a couple of days, the preparations of each class for the Paper Shuffle were starting to get finalized. But for some students, it would be the least of their worries.

"Kikyou-chan, have you heard...?" Nishimura whispered to Kushida with a concerned look.

"About what? Is everything okay, Ryuuko-chan?" she asked.

"Ryuuen-kun... He's been asking about you since yesterday."

Those words confused Kushida. Her confusion slowly turned into discomfort. Of course, she managed to look composed on the outside. She reassured the worried Nishimura that everything was fine. That said, a lot of possible conclusions started forming inside Kushida's mind.

Later that day, her worries only increased as she walked home

with Hondou Ryoutarou, a boy from her class.

"That reminds me, Kikyou-chan. You know Nishino from Class D, right? Nishino Takeko."

"Nishino-san? Yes, I do. Is there something going on with her?"

"Ah, not really. She was just asking about you."

"You seem pretty close," Kikyou smirked teasingly. "Do you have a crush on her or something?"

"N-No way. Ugh... The guys teased me a lot when they found out I was friends with her. I don't really think of Nishino that way. She's more like a big sister to me, if anything." Hondou sighed as he answered.

"A big sister? That's unexpected," Kushida commented.

"Ishizaki and the other goons from Ryuen's class keep picking on us, right? She's usually the one who tells them off."

"Ohh, is that so? How nice of her." Kushida complimented Nishino before getting back on track. "So? What did she ask about me?"

"I think... it was about your previous school."

Kushida's mind froze.

"Kikyou-chan?" Hondou turned around after noticing her stop.

"Oh, uh, mn." She shook her head before smiling again. "I just recalled some... nice memories... from my past school."

Hondou stared at her for a second before smiling back.

"I see. Now I'm feeling nostalgic myself," he replied.

Hondou didn't bother prying, and for that, Kushida was thankful. They continued walking home before finally separating when Hondou got off the elevator.

"See you tomorrow, Kikyou-chan. Thanks for walking home with me again today," he said.

"Oh, no. I should be the one saying that to you Ryoutarou-kun."

On the rare days when both of their friend groups have somewhere to be, Hondou offers to walk home with her. Kushida gladly obliges to keep up appearances, but of course, she knew Hondou had ulterior motives-- having romantic feelings for her and all. She didn't really mind walking home with him sometimes as long as he acted in line. In fact, she was thankful that it was Hondou rather than someone like Ike or Yamauchi. Miyamoto was also fine, but unlike Hondou, he didn't have feelings for her. In fact, Kushida even knew that Miyamoto has a crush on a 2nd-year student.

When the elevator door closed, Kushida's face became clouded. She stayed silent and walked swiftly until she got inside her room.

She leaned against the door as she dropped her bag on the floor. Kushida's breathing started accelerating. She slowly curled herself into a sitting position and held her chest.

"M-My phone..."

Kushida typed something with her shivering fingers.

"Kiyotaka-kun..."

As soon as she rang the call, the other end quickly picked up.

"Hello?"

"Kiyotaka-kun...?"

"Kikyou..." He immediately noticed her deflated tone and asked.

"Is everything okay?"

A familiar, gnawing feeling ate at her. It was the same feeling she felt when someone exposed her vlog in middle school, and the same feeling when Ayanokouji revealed that he'd been recording their conversation.

Kushida contemplated on what to say as Ayanokouji's voice slowly calmed her down.

"Are you there?"

"Mn, I'm here, Kiyotaka-kun. Sorry if I sounded weird for a second there. I was just thinking about something."

"It's about Ryuen, isn't it? Horikita already told me. He's been asking about you, and he's not even being covert about it."

"Yes... And it's not just him. I'm sure he asked his classmates to do the same. One girl was even asking about my previous school."

"That's... certainly dangerous."

"Yes... To be honest, I'm nervous..." Kushida narrowed her eyes as she continued speaking. "But it's fine. I'll start gathering information about this as soon as I can. I'll find out whatever Ryuen-kun is planning."

Ayanokouji didn't respond instantly. He stayed silent. It was only for a couple of seconds, but those short seconds of silence were enough to send chills down Kushida's spine.

"I see. Well, I'm sure you'll come up with something."

"M-Mn..."

She wasn't naive. Kushida knew that she wasn't capable of fighting Ryuen alone. However, she also didn't want to ask for Ayanokouji's help right off the bat to gauge her value. The two of them were playing a game of trust, after all.

Still, she could only deride herself for even trying to test Ayanokouji-- perhaps driven by panic and desperation.

His brief pause indicated that he knew what she was trying to do. And to rub some more salt on her wounded pride, Ayanokouji made his pause very obvious, *deliberately* telling Kushida that he knew everything.

Ayanokouji, then, gave her a gentle warning.

"Just don't overdo it. Taking on Ryuen isn't easy."

Kushida chuckled internally. It wasn't a warning that could apply to him.

"Mhm... I understand."

Hearing Ayanokouji's calm voice made her rethink the entire situation. As he said, was there even any reason for her to start panicking? Sure, Ryuen might've found out her true nature, but no one would believe him even if he starts spreading it around. And even though he must be planning something, crumbling under imaginary pressure would only help the enemy.

"I shouldn't fold like this. If I suddenly act like a weakling, then I won't be able to protect my current life," she thought.

Kushida's eyes showed a gleam of dark light. If anyone wants to disrupt her joyous high school life, she'll see to it that they're eliminated.

"Thanks for hearing me out, Kiyotaka-kun... I'll ask for your help when I need it."

"Sure thing."

She hung up and limply lowered her arms.

"I really can't win against you, Kiyotaka-kun..." she uttered defeatedly. "That's why you're the only one who can protect me..."

Vol. 6: Chapter 3.1.2 - Your Warmth

On the next day, Kikyou's downtrodden attitude became more noticeable to everyone in the class. This would obviously cause them to worry.

"Kikyou-chan... Are you okay?" asked Mii-chan.

"Ryuuen-kun and his classmates are getting creepier with all their questions... It must make you feel awful," Ryuuko comforted her.

"I'm alright, really!" Kikyou feigned a smile. "I am bothered by all this, but I'm sure this is just some sort of strategic move from Class D."

"So now they're targeting you? How annoying! Why can't they just leave us alone?!" Onodera groaned in frustration.

I overheard their conversation as I walked inside the classroom.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun." Kikyou waved at me, and her friends followed suit.

"Good morning," I responded shortly.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can you come over here for a second?" Onodera moved the chair in front of her and patted the seat.

Kikyou, who was sitting on her chair, was currently surrounded by her friends. It seems like they wanted me to join the conversation. Kikyou looked flustered and refused to make eye contact with me. Well, if she's not saying anything, then I guess there's nothing wrong with me coming over.

After taking a seat, they instantly hounded me with probing looks.

"Kiyotaka-kun, aren't you worried about Kikyou-chan?" asked Ryuuko.

"Ryuuen-kun and his class are being intrusive. Just a little more and they might actually start harassing her!" followed Onodera.

Mii-chan and Onigashira nodded in agreement.

"G-Girls... You don't have to interrogate Ayanokouji-kun like this..." Kikyou pleaded but her voice was weak, mostly because of embarrassment.

To be honest, I was unsure whether this was still part of her act.

"It's fine. I think I should be involved in this. I'm your best friend, after all."

The four girls nodded, urging me to continue.

"Well... If Ryuuen keeps this up, then there's no way I'd stay on

the sidelines."

"Is... that so...?" Kikyou turned her flushed face toward me.

"Yeah. I'll protect you, Kikyou. I won't let him do anything to you."

"Kyaaahhh~!"

Girly squeals reverberated inside the classroom. It wasn't just Kikyou's friends. Apparently, some other girls were paying attention to the conversation, as well.

"Oh my god!"

"So romantic!"

"Die, normie!" Wait, who's this?

"He really said that!"

"Are you two really not dating?!"

"I want to bash your heads in!" Who are these violent people?!

"Even my heart is racing~!"

"I'm so envious!"

Tons of exaggerated reactions could be heard. The classroom was in chaos so early in the morning. We might get minus points if this keeps up.

"K-K-Kiyotaka-kun, what are you saying, all of a sudden?!" She never expected my response, so her confusion was understandable.

"I'm just telling the truth..."

"I get it, I get it! Just stop talking now, please!" Kikyou messily waved her hands around.

Most of the students inside the classroom were definitely listening to us now. I should probably start dialing it back.

"Kikyou-chan, you're being really *dere* right now. It's super cute!" Onodera hugged her with a squeal.

"Anyone would act like this after that! Right, Ryuuko-chan?!"

"Who knows? Kiyotaka-kun has never said anything like that to me, so I wouldn't know." She shrugged with a smirk plastered on her face.

"I-I've been betrayed!"

On the side of the room...

"Whoa... Was there a commotion or something?" Haruka entered the classroom, wondering about what was going on.

"*Sniff*... Haruka-chan..."

"Airi?! Are you okay...?! Why are you in tears?!"

Meanwhile, the boys who witnessed everything just sat quietly with their souls coming out of their mouths.

When lunchtime came around, I escaped all the way to the Tea

Ceremony Clubroom. Konishi-senpai said that I could use it anytime as long as it was open. What a considerate senpai. I feel really happy about being spoiled as a kouhai.

"I'm here~!" The door opened and a girl appeared with a big grin on her face.

"Kikyou..."

"What? I asked for permission this time, you know? Or am I interrupting your alone time?"

"Not really. I just didn't expect you to be here."

"Well, I'm here now. But this time, I brought my own bento!"

She smilingly took her seat beside me. This time, the two of us ate on a desk instead of lounging on the floor.

"Itadakimasu."

"Itadakimasu~!"

We started chowing down on our lunches. I personally felt like I was in heaven. This new set was as delicious as they advertised it. I don't regret burning a lot of points for it. I glanced over to my side and saw Kikyou enjoying her food with a smile.

"You don't look upset. I thought you'd scold me because of what happened earlier," I said, kicking off the conversation.

"I *would*, but what you said really made me happy, so it's fine," she shrugged.

"I see..." Well, at least she's not angry at me.

We talked about a few things before finishing our meals. As usual, I just sat quietly after cleaning up, much like I did during the sports festival.

"You really like to sit like that," Kikyou said.

"The cold floor is nice, and leaning against the wall feels relaxing. For me, at least."

Back then, we were wearing our jerseys for the sports festival. But that was over now, and we were back to wearing our school uniforms. So when Kikyou walked toward me, it was inevitable for me to get a glimpse of the garment under her skirt. I don't know if she noticed, but Kikyou sat down without acting any differently, so I'll pass it off as an accident.

"You're right. It *is* relaxing."

She stuck close beside me as our bodies touched. And as she always does, Kikyou leaned her head on my shoulders like it was the most natural thing to do.

"I'm sure you're well aware of it, but this is something that a couple would usually do, right?" I asked.

"I guess so. But we've been this close for a while now, and it didn't really matter. Or is it starting to bother you~?" Kikyou responded with a cheeky tone.

"Not at all. As I've said before, it's a refreshing experience. And at the end of the day, I'm still a guy. Something like this wouldn't bother me. In fact, it's the opposite."

"If it wasn't for your monotone way of speaking, I would've immediately thought you were hitting on me," she said.

"But I *am* hitting on you."

"Eh-?"

Silence enveloped the empty classroom. With our legs stretched out, I can easily see Kikyou's fidgeting feet.

"Kiyotaka-kun... Even I'd get embarrassed if you stare at my legs like that..."

"No, I'm not-"

I found my words interrupted by Kikyou's sudden actions. She put her hand on my chest as her lips grazed my ears.

"Kiyotaka-kun, I..."

I turned to face her-- our noses only a couple of centimeters from each other. It was the same longing face as before. Her eyes were riddled with reluctance and resolve.

"Kikyou..." I grabbed the hand that touched my chest. "Are you sure about this?"

Our fingers intertwined with each other as I used my other hand to touch her pretty face. She didn't respond with words and silently closed her eyes.

In the next moment, my lips met hers.

"Mm..."

It was a kiss that only lasted for a second. After we separated, I could feel Kikyou's ragged breath on my skin. She meekly tried to turn away but I didn't let her. Kikyou stared into my eyes as her lips trembled.

"Kiyotaka...-kun..."

"Yeah?"

"Kiss me... more..."

Without so much as a reply, I slowly leaned in to kiss her again.

Seconds passed as we felt each other's softness. There were brief moments of separation to catch our breath, but we immediately pressed against each other's lips soon after.

The months of repressed feelings that were built up from all of the tension we've created had finally burst out.

Kikyou guided my hand toward her chest. I could feel her jolt up as soon as I touched it. However, she didn't cower and let my hand rest there.

She put her arms around me as we adjusted our bodies to face each other. Kikyou elevated herself without separating her lips from mine. She then plopped down on top of my lap and inched closer

for an embrace.

One of my hands touched her chest while the other caressed her thigh. It slowly crept up under her pleated skirt.

"Mn~. Haah... K-Kiyotaka-kun..."

She pulled away from our kiss to catch her breath.

"Hyah-?! H-Hnnng...-!"

However, Kikyou didn't have the luxury to relax as soon as I started kissing her on the neck.

Author's Notes:

Continuation is behind a paywall. Pay up for the sauce.

Vol. 6: Chapter 3.1.3 - Under the Weather

"Huh-?!"

The sounds of Kikyou yelping alerted everyone in the class. That includes me, who was taking a nap.

"K-Kikyou-chan? Are you alright? You suddenly fell asleep when the break started and now this... Did you not get enough rest last night...?"

"Eh? Ah, mn... Yeah, I think I'm just a bit tired..."

Well, thanks to the noise she made, I managed to snap out of my own dizzy spell.

"You good, Kiyotaka?" Akito looked behind and asked me.

"Yeah... I stayed up last night reading a light novel. My bad."

"You're becoming more and more of an otaku like Sotomura and Ijuuin. That's pretty amusing considering your personality."

"Join us. You're in for a world of fun."

"The contrast of your tone and words makes me feel like I'm being invited to a cult, but as your friend, I'll consider it," he chuckled. "It's rare for you to doze off like that. 'Same goes for Kushida."

It was true that I spent my entire nighttime reading another light novel series. I should probably start cutting back on it just to maintain my health.

It's also atypical for Kikyou to be lacking in sleep, but since she can feel Ryuuen's crosshairs pointed at her, it's not strange for Kikyou to start overthinking due to anxiety.

"Seems like we had it pretty bad last night, huh? I wonder if she got nightmares, waking up in that manner?"

Akito shrugged, narrowing his eyes to get a better look at Kikyou's expression.

"Who knows? She doesn't look scared, at least. In fact, I think she looks flustered. Maybe she had an embarrassing dream." He turned back to me and asked. "How about you? Did you dream about anything? You slept for a good ten minutes. Isn't that around an hour or two in the dream world?"

Contrary to popular belief, time isn't actually compressed when we dream.

"Hmm... I don't think so."

Well, it's not like I can tell anyone about the dream I just had.

Climbing the stairs of adulthood with Kikyoun-- That's a wild premise for a dream. I'm glad her scream woke me up. Seeing any more of that would've been bad for a teenage boy like me.

I gave her a quick glance and saw her looking at me. Kikyoun immediately averted her gaze and looked away. Her face turned increasingly red as she tried her best to act normal in front of Ryuuko and the others.

"There's no way..."

As the teacher walked in, I dismissed the ridiculous idea that maybe we saw the same dream, and paid attention to the lecture instead.

Kikyoun's POV:

Ugh... I can't even look at Kiyotaka-kun anymore...

What in the world was that crazy dream, anyway?! Are we even capable of doing that...? I mean, sure, there are a lot of bottled-up feelings inside me, but there's no way Kiyotaka-kun feels the same, right?

And besides, even if I did have feelings for him, it's not like we can just start dating and do... *that*...

"Kikyoun-chan, you look red. Are you feeling hot?"

"H-Hot-?!"

"Excuse me, Kushida-kun. Is there a problem?" The teacher raised an eyebrow in displeasure.

"Ah-! I'm very sorry, Sensei. I'm just feeling a bit under the weather."

Shit! Mii-chan probably just asked me if I felt feverish, but it caught me off-guard!

"Is that so? Then go ahead and visit the infirmary."

"I-It's fine, Sensei. I'm feeling much better now. Thank you very much."

"Really? Well, sure."

I'm not even given a warning for disrupting the class. The teachers must feel really good about the point system doing their disciplinary duties for us.

I whisperingly reassured Mii-chan and the others about my condition. The strange looks that my classmates gave me were annoying, to say the least.

I'm sure I'll get lots of questions from the boys about this. They'd want me to open up to them so they can act like someone I can rely on when I'm having a problem. Well, I'll just do my thing and keep them at arm's length. It'll be tough, but I can't talk about it with any

of my friends-- especially Kiyotaka-kun.

(Kushida Kikyou spent the entire day with a slightly hastened heartbeat.)

Vol. 6: Chapter 3.2 - You've Passed the Test

The next day after the announcement of the Paper Shuffle, Horikita immediately made her move. After getting permission from Chabashira-sensei, our homeroom period will now be used to discuss how the upcoming short quiz will be handled.

"The tutors' group was able to meet yesterday and we've managed to reach a consensus. We've figured out how our class will be answering the short quiz next week in relation to how the pairs will be decided."

"Woah, you've cracked the code again, Horikita-chan?" Ike asked excitedly.

"It's not as hard as the Zodiac Exam. I'm sure some of you will be able to do it if you tried," she answered. "Now then, we will be making some changes to the tutoring groups. Some of the tutors will be assigned to bigger groups while the rest will focus on making the test questions."

The class started murmuring. Some of them looked excited. Well, it's an opportunity to spend some time with other classmates. After months of working together as a class, you'd think that we're united as one just like Ichinose's Class C. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

According to Abraham Maslow, a key driver of human motivation is the need to fit in, as stated in his theory about the hierarchy of needs. And in order to do that, students form groups and cliques. Cliques play a large part in our class's social system. Some cliques interact often with other cliques who share the same interest, but students from completely different cliques rarely interact. For example, Karuizawa's group might interact often with Matsushita and her friends, but they almost never talk to Kikyou's group.

The last groupings for our study sessions mended that a bit, but since most of us were already doing okay with self-studying, the clique-oriented mindset never really faded. Of course, I'm not saying that there's something wrong with it, but I'm sure the class will work even better together if everyone is on the same page.

"Well, that's just plain idealistic. People are different, after all..." I muttered under my breath.

"We'll be sending a copy of these in the group chat later, but for now, please listen carefully. After some observations, we've concluded that the pairings will be balanced. In other words, the person who gets the highest score will be paired with the person who gets the lowest score, and so on and so forth."

Hirata started writing the details as Horikita explained everything.

"We plan to make specific pairs, and because the short quiz will be easy, it wouldn't be difficult to shoot for specific scores and perfectly control our pairings." Horikita pointed at Ijuuin's name. "As you've already observed ever since the midterms of the first semester, Ijuuin-kun and the students listed above him would be our top twelve academic achievers. There is a gap between their academic abilities and the rest, so we must guarantee that they are paired with the lowest-scoring students."

We have around twelve students in the class who get scores that are consistently above 80 points, including me. But that's where the streak ends. Some might occasionally get a score of 70 points or above, but Yokoyama and the rest of our class tend to score in the high-to-mid-60s and below. So if we look at it from another perspective, more than half of us are average or below average in academics, which isn't a good thing in general, and is a pretty bad thing for this particular exam where the ratio between bad scorers and good scorers should at least be balanced. (1)

"Hell yeah! I wouldn't need to answer a single thing!" Yamauchi answered excitedly.

Most of our classmates celebrated as well. Even Yokoyama, the student listed right below Ijuuin, would only need to answer twenty-seven questions for the quiz. Of course, they needed to guarantee that the questions they'll answer will be correct.

"Hmph," Kouenji kept smiling as he polished his nails.

Some of us gave him worried looks. Given his personality, there's a good chance that he wouldn't bother cooperating. However, Horikita ignored this issue and continued on.

"If you mess up and create disorder in the pairings, then there will be nothing we can do about it, so please be very careful."

Everyone observed the decided pairings. Most of us didn't really mind whoever we were paired with. It's not like we'll be too involved with our partners for anything other than the final results.

"Horikita-chan, which class will we choose as the opponent?" Hondou raised a hand and asked a vital question.

"We'll choose Class D by default. They're the easiest class to win against. Even though we're Class A, we're still some ways behind Sakayanagi-san's class in terms of academics. It's the same with

Ichinose-san's Class C."

"We'll try our best again this time, Horikita-san."

"It doesn't matter who I'm paired with. I'll get a perfect score and win!"

"We'll surpass them soon!"

The atmosphere was great. Most of Class A were more than ready to prove that they deserve to be in Class A. Of course, the true test of their determination will be during lectures and study sessions. If they can keep up their current enthusiasm, improving their scores wouldn't be hard at all.

"Now that we're done with the details regarding the quiz and the exam, I would like to show everyone the new groupings for the study sessions."

"Ohh..."

"Five tutors only, huh?"

"Ayanokouji-kun, Kushida-san, and Matsushita-san will be assigned to make the test questions, so they won't be tutoring anyone for the exam."

The class made some noise of wonder as they read the lineup. It seems like these new groups were designed with respect to the current cliques. Mii-chan is a great teacher, but she's not good with people. She managed her last group with Ryuuko's help, but Ryuuko will be a tutor herself this time around. Having Mii-chan teach a few mild-mannered students like Inogashira, Ueno, and Minami (Hakuo) is certainly a great adjustment, and Onodera will be there as their mood maker.

"Drats! Kikyou-chan isn't a tutor anymore!"

"How unfortunate!"

Horikita also decided to handle Ike and Yamauchi so she can keep a close eye on them. Being assigned as a question maker gave Kikyou some sense of freedom. She was tired of getting involved with the two, after all.

"Yukimura, huh?" Akito touched his chin with a curious look on his face.

Ijuuin and Professor are pretty close to me, so they frequently talk with my friends from the Ayanokouji Group. Professor managed to give Airi some good advice for her Photography Contest, and Ijuuin is the main supplier for Ken and Haruka's budding hobbies, so I'm sure there won't be any unnecessary awkwardness in the group. Akito must be wondering how Yukimura would blend in, especially since he's the tutor.

"I was the one who personally requested Yukimura to teach you guys," I said.

Akito turned to me, slightly surprised by my sudden words.

"You did?"

"Yeah. Yukimura is a good teacher. Kikuchi told me that his techniques for studying are great and effective."

"Well, he managed to teach Minami (Setsuya), who's just as much of a musclehead as Ken." Akito laughed, seemingly convinced.

"Are there any questions?" asked Horikita.

The class stayed silent as they shook their heads. It seems like we're good to go. We'll have an entire weekend to prepare for the quiz. The contents will apparently be a bunch of lessons from junior high, so none of us needed to study that hard.

When class ended. Horikita and Hirata urged the groups to start their first study sessions. Each tutor has absolute freedom on how they want to do things.

"Yukimura, where do you wanna go?" Akito decided to kickstart the group himself.

"Oh, Miyake... Hmm, I would prefer to have our meeting to be somewhere quiet, but I think the library will be packed by now."

"I guess you're right. Let's ask the other members for their opinion."

Akito called for the others, and in no time, the group was completed.

"New faces, huh? Well, I guess only Yukimura-kun would be the new face for me." Haruka greeted them with a smile.

If it were the Haruka from before, I'm sure she would act a bit anti-social toward her new groupmates. Thanks to the Ayanokouji Group, especially Airi, she managed to loosen herself up a bit.

"It's considerate for Horikita-dono to group us with the members of the Ayanokouji Group. I, for one, feel very comfortable with the idea of studying with you people," Professor agreed with a smirk.

"I feel the same. I'm not a great teacher, but please feel free to ask me for help, Yukimura-kun."

"Oh, right. You're also good at academics, aren't you, Ijuuin? That's a relief. I'm sure your assistance will be very useful," Yukimura nodded.

"You know what this means, Ken, Haruka. You'll have to start restraining yourselves from slacking off too much."

"Huh? The hell does that mean-?!"

"M-Miyacchi... You can't be saying-?!"

"That's right. No games and light novels for you two." Akito shot them a sadistic smirk.

"N-No way... I was so hyped for the next game after finishing the first installment last night!" Ken trembled in shock.

"But the next volume is the climax! I can't just stop now!" Haruka

looked similarly mortified.

"Hey, Sotomura, Ijuuin. Be sure to not lend them anything before we finish the exam, okay? Ignore them even if they raise the price they're willing to pay," said Akito.

"Of course, Miyake-kun," Ijuuin nodded. "Normally, we'd be too scared to decline Sudou-kun's demands, but we have Ayanokouji-kun as our bodyguard, so we're not afraid of anyone anymore. The security side of our business is very stable."

"Goodbye Despair... More like Hello Despair..."

"And I finally reached the seventh volume, too..."

Anguish could be seen on Ken and Haruka's faces. Airi gently caressed their backs to comfort them.

"I didn't know Hasebe and Sudou were into that stuff." Yukimura was surprised by their conversation. He didn't think that a cheery girl like Haruka would be interested in light novels or a delinquent such as Ken would be interested in visual novels.

"You gotta thank Kiyotaka for that. He's a bigger otaku than these two combined. It still boggles me how that guy is an honor student when all he does is play games or read manga and light novels."

"W-Well, it's Ayanokouji, after all..." Yukimura agreed with a slightly defeated smile.

It's true that I've influenced Haruka and Ken to a certain degree. Even Akito and Airi had started reading manga themselves. However, that's not because I'm a passionate otaku who wants to spread the message of the otaku gods. I just wanted to repay Professor and Ijuuin for lending me their stuff for free by advertising their business to other potential customers.

Haruka, being the normie girl that she was, was put off by Professor and his strange speech. But after slowly learning the wonders of anime and manga, she started to not mind him at all, even going as far as to join him in his bit sometimes. Ken was already friends with the two of them even before the Ayanokouji Group formed, so it was easier for him to get absorbed in games once you give him the good titles.

We initially gave Ken some manga to read because we knew he hated reading books with nothing but words. Visual novels are mostly the same, but I guess he didn't mind the amount of wordiness as long as you trick his brain into thinking that he's playing a game.

Akito was most the level-headed of the group, as per usual. But he's starting to enjoy teasing the two when they get too invested in their media. Airi, meanwhile, was just enjoying anything that we recommended to her.

"Hey there, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Hm? Oh, Matsushita."

"Do you want us to have a meeting? I'm free today, so I don't really mind."

"I'm the same. In fact, we can even start making some questions as soon as later." Only for the ones we've already discussed in class, of course.

"You seem enthusiastic about this."

"The sooner we finish, the better. I'm sure you're thinking the same thing," I shrugged.

"You're right about that," Matsushita chuckled.

We quietly observed Kikyou as she wrapped up her conversation with Mii-chan and the others.

"Kikyou-chan!" she called with a wave.

"Oh, Chiaki-chan, Kiyotaka-kun, are we going to work on it today?"

"Ideally, but it doesn't need to be today. You seem to have made plans with your friends," replied Matsushita.

"Yes, actually. I want to help out with Mii-chan's group today."

"That's totally fine. Matsushita and I can lay the groundwork for now. We have more than a month to do this, anyway."

It was decided that Hirata and Horikita's groups will have a joint session inside the classroom for today, while the other groups left the classroom. Of course, that includes the two of us. Matsushita and I wanted to chill before talking about school, so we decided to crash at Keyaki Mall.

"It's been so long since the two of us hung out like this," she said.

"Yeah. I don't even remember the last time we did," I replied.

It looked like we were having a classic after-school date inside Palette, but I'm already used to this by now. Being self-conscious about it won't help.

"Well, this is a perfect opportunity. I just wanted to ask you some questions."

"About what?"

"About the Zodiac Exam."

"Now that's an unexpected throwback."

"Right?" she giggled. "But it's been stuck on my mind ever since I started thinking about it."

Somehow, that special exam keeps coming back to haunt me.

"What are you talking about, exactly?"

During the Zodiac Exam, I needed to know whether Horikita had figured out the pattern so I can give Ryuuen the signal. Of course, I didn't do it directly. I would signal someone else to do it for me, and that someone... was Karuizawa. Obviously, I asked her to use a dummy account.

And for the signal, that would be my message to her.

I thought about using a dummy account myself, but I anticipated that the timing might be too tight, and in the end, it really was. I "revealed" my secret plan regarding the Dog Group and showed the contents of my phone as an alibi, so making Karuizawa do it was the right decision.

I solicited Matsushita's cooperation by telling her about my secret plan with the Dog Group. With her help, I managed to give Ryuuen enough time to send in the VIPs for the Horse Group and Tiger Group before Horikita and Ichinose could commence their defensive maneuver (and at the same time, Katsuragi also sent in the VIP name for the Cow Group). In other words, I gave away one VIP name from our class and two VIP names from Ichinose's class, which technically meant that I betrayed them.

"Well, you told me that you managed to strike a deal with Ryuuen-kun, right? The two of you arranged a deal to make the Dog Group and Dragon Group achieve Outcome #1."

"That's what I said."

"So you knew Ryuuen-kun didn't really know the names of the VIPs from other classes... Because if he really did know, then there's no way he'll let Horikita-san win. And the fact that he agreed with the idea of cooperating with you meant that there was more merit for him to achieve Outcome #1."

That's true. If Ryuuen really knew all of the VIP names, he wouldn't bother listening to anyone else's plans. If she managed to deduce things this far, then Matsushita must've really analyzed the details of the results despite not being a member of the Dragon Group.

"Well, he did know the VIP from the Horse Group and Tiger Group."

She tried to lay down a trap, but it won't work on me. That said, I couldn't completely evade her.

"But how did he? The VIP from the Tiger Group was a Class C student, so I didn't really pay attention to them, but Minami-kun was the VIP from the Horse Group. How did Ryuuen-kun know that he was the VIP?"

"I see... Are you saying that I sold him out to make Ryuuen cooperate with me?" I replied calmly.

"I asked Minami-kun about this myself. He said he didn't do anything to make anyone suspicious of him. Kokoro-chan and Kayoko-chan, his groupmates, said the same thing. So this was the only conclusion I came up with."

"Well, I guess it makes sense if you think about it. If I was in cahoots with the Dog Group members, then I wouldn't need you to

tell me whether Horikita had given you guys the VIP names. The representative of the Dog Group would handle it themselves."

"Yes. Your reason for needing my cooperation was to prevent any misunderstandings on their part, but I felt like that was a bit of a stretch."

I sipped my tea before giving her a reply.

"You can ask Horikita for the details. If you're already this deep in, then you deserve to know the entire truth."

Lying wouldn't be a good decision. It's better to just have her know what really happened.

"Can't you just tell me everything now?" she pouted.

"I don't want to. Explaining it again is a pain."

"So you're dumping the job on Horikita-san, huh...?" Matsushita looked at me with an exasperated sigh.

Satisfied with the conversation, Matsushita and I decided to look over our initial plans for the paper shuffle.

Since Matsushita was already working with me ever since the start of the Zodiac Exam, it would've made sense for me to make her my middleman for signaling Ryuen. However, I chose Karuizawa for this exact reason. Matsushita was sharp. Unless I can use something to guarantee that she won't be an enemy, it's better for her to know nothing. (2)

Author's Notes:

To put things into perspective, I'll be quantifying the academic abilities of each class. I could try to be accurate and use their potential class averages as the criteria, but I won't be doing that this time. I'll be assigning their power levels purely on "vibes" 🐼.

We'll set the ceiling for Sakayanagi's class as the 100-pointer.

Canon Volume 6:

Sakayanagi - 100

Ichinose - 98

Horikita - 70

Ryuen - 67

Alter Volume 6:

Sakayanagi - 100

Ichinose - 98

Horikita - 85

Ryuen - 67

Horikita's class didn't neglect their studies as much as they did in the

canon during the start of the school year. Not only that. They also formed study groups very early on. This helped solidify their fundamental knowledge which made learning the following lessons a lot easier.

Ichinose's class being 98 points is just a nudge to them being collectively only 2 points behind Sakayanagi's class during the canon Paper Shuffle.

1. Horikita's class having at least eleven decent academic students is canon without including Kiyotaka. So the lineup checks out.

2. Another purpose of the Zodiac Exam was for Kiyotaka to test Chiaki. She passed the test, which meant that Kiyotaka recognizes her abilities. However, it was also a test to see whether he can use her in the same manner again. And since Chiaki managed to uncover everything, Kiyotaka will no longer do so. To put it into perspective, let's say his plan for the Zodiac Exam was a Level 1 Plan. Since Chiaki managed to deduce Kiyotaka's true objectives, he won't use her again in other Level 1 Plans. However, he would still use her in Level 2 Plans where she won't be able to deduce Kiyotaka's real goal with the information she's given.

Vol. 6: Chapter 3.3 - Short Quiz

Our weekend went by in a flash, and before we knew it, Chabashira-sensei had walked inside the classroom with the test papers in hand. The quiz was moved to today, a Tuesday, because of some rescheduling issues, so we had time to briefly discuss our strategies yesterday.

"We'll begin shortly, but first, I would like to make an announcement. You nominated Class D as your target for the Paper Shuffle, but you were contested by Class C. Unfortunately, the school has decided that Class C will target Class D."

The atmosphere turned heavy as my classmates started to murmur.

"We lost the lottery..."

"How unlucky..."

"And for your chosen target... It will be Class C," Chabashira-sensei continued.

"We'll have to compete with Ichinose-san's class?"

"That means we need to get a higher score than them, right?"

"Do we even stand a chance...?"

Even Horikita started to look tense. This wasn't a favorable match-up by any means. We'll have to fight at a disadvantage.

"Meanwhile, Class D has targeted Class B without any competition. And for Class B, well you could already guess by process of elimination. Their target will be Class A."

"Class B will target us?!"

"Can this get any worse?!"

Sakayanagi targeted our class. That wasn't a surprise by any means. However...

"Seriously...? Ryuen targeted Sakayanagi's class?"

"That's crazy..."

"Chabashira-sensei." Horikita raised her hand.

"What is it, Horikita?"

"You said that *"the school has decided that Class C will target Class D,"* right...?"

"Yes. Is there a problem?" Chabashira-sensei asked, a small grin forming on her lips.

"As far as I remember, contested nominations will be decided via lottery... But did the lottery even happen?"

Her question confused almost everyone in the class, and understandably so. Unless you paid attention to how the match-ups went, you won't really notice why Horikita would ask such a question.

"What do you mean, Horikita-san?" asked Hirata.

"Well, we nominated Class D... Class D nominated Class B... And Class B nominated our class. It's a three-way nomination with Class C out of the loop. No matter class they choose to nominate, they'd end up attacking themselves if they lose the lottery. So... it made me wonder if the school deliberately made the choice of having Class C attack Class D to prevent a three-way match-up."

The uproar got a little bit louder as our classmates started to understand what Horikita was getting at.

"I see... If that was the case, then we'd lose no matter what," said Hirata.

"And since it was fairly obvious that our choice would be Class D, then maybe..." Horikita's expression turned dark. "Maybe Class D... or rather, Ryuen-kun, deliberately chose to nominate Class B to guarantee this outcome..."

"Great observation," Chabashira-sensei nodded in agreement. "You're right about how the process went. Because of the three-way nomination between Class A, Class B, and Class D, the school decided to approve Class C's choice no matter what class they nominated. It was the most efficient way to have proper match-ups."

In other words, we never had the chance to get our ideal match-up to begin with.

"That said, whether Class D made their choice while anticipating this outcome isn't something I would know," she shrugged.

"We understand, Sensei. We'll keep the results in mind..." Hirata took the initiative and answered in Horikita's place after seeing her slightly shaken demeanor. "Alright, everyone. We still have a quiz to take. Please remember our plan. Don't get distracted."

"Oho? You look prepared."

After Hirata brought them back to the present, the class remembered that we were currently in the midst of tackling a very unique quiz.

"Just you watch, Sae-chan-sensei. This short quiz will be a breeze," said Onizuka.

Ike and Yamauchi's arms were crossed as they scoffed with confident looks.

"Looks like you came up with a strategy. I assume you've reviewed really hard for this quiz," she said.

Chabashira-sensei's unexpected words earned dubious looks.

"Review...? But this quiz wouldn't affect our grades, right?" Ike asked nervously.

"Oh, no, of course, it won't. That's what I said before."

"T-Then, it's not like I need a good score..." His prior confidence was starting to deplete.

"Sure. If things go the way you expect them to, that is."

Our classmates started looking around anxiously. They suddenly started doubting the strategy we came up with.

"What does she mean...?"

"Should we get good scores, after all?"

The commotion prompted Horikita to make a move herself.

"Don't get flustered. There are no problems with our plan," she said.

Horikita managed to compose herself despite what just transpired. *"Don't mind the things we can't control. Keep your eyes on the front."* Her calm and collected response successfully influenced our classmates.

"Don't worry, everyone. I trust that our plan would work," followed Hirata.

"Let's keep it together, everyone!" Kikyou's cheerful attitude managed to completely wash away their doubts.

The students of Class 1-A steeled themselves and prepared for the quiz with determined eyes.

Chabashira-sensei looked at me with a smirk, to which I could only sigh in response. Seriously, she needs to stop teasing her students.

"Impressive, Class A. Alright, please pass this along. I'll remind you, just in case, but any form of cheating will result in harsh punishments."

We kept the papers facedown before the test started. The moment everyone received their copy, Chabashira-sensei finally gave the signal.

"Begin."

I slowly turned the paper upside down and read the contents of the test.

"Oh..."

I couldn't help but make a noise. Well, it's not like I'm the only one who had that reaction. We expected this quiz to have an easier level of difficulty, but not by this much. Even small children could complete this test. Of course, there were a few difficult questions here and there, but even someone like Ike or Yamauchi can score sixty points or higher if they didn't panic.

If this test's purpose was to mess up how we were going to get paired, then it could've been a disaster if Horikita didn't implement

her strategy. On the other hand, now it's undeniable that as long as we stick to the plan, we'll be able to manipulate our pairings perfectly.

The short quiz ended without incident, and the results would be announced the very next day.

"They sure are making a fuss about it when we have more pressing matters to think about..." I sighed while reading the Ayanokouji Group Chat.

Anyway, I decided to ignore my friends who were busy chatting on their phones. I focused my attention forward and watched Chabashira-sensei enter the classroom.

Everyone believed that Horikita's strategy would pay off, so even though our classmates looked tense, their eyes were filled with anticipation and some confidence.

"I will now announce the pairings for the final exam with respect to your results on the short quiz yesterday. I should be explaining the test's real purpose after revealing who's paired with who, but you've already managed to understand everything beforehand. Further explanation will not be necessary. Good job, everyone."

Chabashira-sensei's genuine praise earned some wry smiles, but most of us were starting to get used to it.

She posted the results, and the class rose to a clamor.

"Woah..."

"It's just as Horikita-san predicted!"

"Amazing... We really did it!"

"Huh? Hey, Ueno, weren't you supposed to be Sonoda-san's partner?" asked Makida.

"Ohh... It seems like she and Okitani-kun switched places," Ueno answered with an enervated tone.

"Sorry, Horikita-san! I must've answered an item carelessly and got it wrong!" Sonoda apologized profusely.

If Sonoda only made a single mistake, she would have the same score as Okitani. That means she lost the fifty-fifty possibility of getting paired with the intended student between Ueno or Yokoyama.

"It's alright, Sonoda-san. This wouldn't affect our lineup too much," Horikita reassured her.

We were lucky that it was the two of them since their grades weren't that far apart from each other. As Horikita said, it wasn't really a big deal, so we just brushed it off.

"Hey, look at that..."

"Woah... That's rare..."

Noticing something else, everyone turned their eyes to Kouenji. His partner was Professor, which was in line with what Horikita had planned. They were all surprised since no one expected Kouenji, of all people, to cooperate.

Of course, he just scoffed at the attention he was getting and continued admiring himself using his cheval glass.

"That is all for today. You can continue discussing your plans as long you don't make too much noise," Chabashira-sensei announced as she walked out of the room. "Well then."

Horikita took her place and proceeded with her usual instructive dialogue with the class. Since we were doing alright on our fundamentals, the study groups will be focusing more on the current topics so as to not fall behind. Horikita has given a lot of freedom to the other tutors, showing how much trust she had in them as fellow competent students.

I wish her older brother could see her right now. This type of leadership is something he would approve of for his sister. It wasn't forced, but more importantly, it wasn't lonely... In other words, it's the kind of leadership that Horikita can foster for herself.

"Well, that's just how I understand it. Only Horikita can know what kind of leadership is right for her. At the end of the day, the results speak for themselves..." I quietly thought to myself.

And for those results... We'll see a couple of years from now.

"Kiyotaka-kun, are you busy after this?" When class finally ended, Kikyoku approached me with a big smile on her face.

I saw my friends walking out of the classroom in a hurry. Ken has a duplicate key to my room, so I doubt there'd be a problem.

(Note: His room key was duplicated without consent.)

"Oh, Kikyoku. Well-" Before answering, I instantly noticed the eyes of many students focused on me. "Kinda..."

This might be a weird detail, but all of them were girls. I feel like I know why, but I decided to stop thinking about it.

"Oh, so you had plans?" she asked.

"Yeah. My friends and I were supposed to hang out after school."

"I see! Alright, then. I wanted to hang out with you today, too, but it can wait."

Kikyoku waved her hand goodbye as she caught up to Ryuuko and the others.

I could feel my phone vibrate inside my pocket. Some messages came in from a bunch of my classmates.

"Oh... Even Ichinose and some people from her class are messaging me," I muttered.

"Do you wanna walk around with me for a bit?" asked Matsushita. "You want to waste some time, right?"

"Are you an esper?"

"Oh, please. You know I could understand that much," she grinned, looking all smug. "That's right-- even Kushida-chan's little show earlier." (1)

Just by observing our behavior, Matsushita managed to deduce our intentions. In hindsight, my friends' actions were pretty easy to read, but the fact that she saw through Kikyuu and my act was impressive.

"I guess so. It's you, after all," I shrugged before asking. "Do you wanna come later, as well?"

"Eh? Can I?"

"It's not like you're a stranger or anything..."

"That's true but..." Matsushita hesitated for a second, but after seeing the deadpan look on my face, she managed to make up her mind. "Well, I guess it's not worth worrying about, huh? Alright, I'll come."

I opened the group chat and messaged my friends about Kikyuu and Matsushita's attendance. Of course, all of them said it was fine.

After that, the two of us loitered around Keyaki Mall. We eventually stopped by Palette to grab a drink.

"There's no way you can do it?!"

I remember that voice. It was Ishizaki, from Class D. The liveliness inside Palette dissipated as his loud voice echoed inside the place.

"Sir, we need to have at least a week's worth of advanced notice for any special order cakes," the cashier replied. "I'm afraid it's not possible to prepare something on the same day."

Ishizaki and the other Class D guys with him decided to withdraw while feeling disgruntled. When they left, the atmosphere went back to normal, much to everyone's relief.

"What was that about...?" muttered Matsushita.

"Well, I don't know."

"Hmm... They probably wanted to order a cake for someone, but alas, they didn't do their research." Matsushita shook her head while smirking. "If it's a birthday cake, then does that mean someone from Class D has the same birthday as you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Who knows? Having the same birthday as someone isn't that uncommon, anyway."

"Given Ishizaki-kun's attitude, I wonder if the cake was for Ryuuen-kun?"

"That's certainly a possibility," I replied.

But if that's the case, their careless display meant that the cake

wasn't Ryuuen's idea. Even Ken knew that we had to reserve a cake when we celebrated Airi's birthday a few days ago. Then again, he might've just gotten that knowledge recently after we celebrated *his* birthday a little while back.

"Oh. Finally, huh?"

I took my phone out and read Akito's message beckoning me to head back. With that Matsushita and I met up with Kikyou and went to my room together.

Today was October 20th, which was also the day when I was born. This day always went by like any other day back then. The only person who ever recognized it as a day worth celebrating was Matsuo. And now, for the first time in my life, I celebrated it with more than one person.

Author's Notes:

1. Kikyou knew that many girls will approach Kiyotaka about his plans for the day, so she put on a show of being rejected to discourage everyone else. It saved Kiyotaka from being bothered by others, but of course, Chiaki saw through all of it.

***Thank you for the 1 million reads on Classroom of the Elite:
Alter - Self-Test!***

Vol. 6: Chapter 4.1 - Mise-en-Scène

November 5th, Friday.

Haruka will be sleeping over at Airi's place tonight, while the guys of the Ayanokouji Group will go home.

"Your birthdays are so near to each other. I feel like we're celebrating once a week," said Akito.

"Your birthday's on the 13th of July, right, Akito?" I asked.

"Yep. I'm the outlier," he shrugged.

"It's my first time spendin' this many points in a short while. Not that I'm complainin' though, since it's for my friends," said Ken.

"It's fine. We're filthy rich, thanks to how much class points we have..." Akito laughed, almost sounding guilty.

After the third study session, the Ayanokouji Group decided to celebrate Haruka's birthday in Airi's room. We decided to splurge by ordering high-end restaurant food instead of going for homemade ones. Well, it's mostly because we didn't have that much time to prepare considering our current schedule.

"See ya', Kiyotaka."

"Let's talk about our plans for tomorrow in the chat later."

"Sure. See you tomorrow," I replied.

When the two of them left, I went inside my room and called a certain person.

"Hello? Ayanokouji?"

"Ah, Chabashira-sensei. I'm just here to check up on everything."

"Oh, about that. Rest assured. The chairman has done what you asked for. You can check their website right now. The changes were made without any issues, and all other devices except for the ones in this school have restricted access to that page."

"Alright. Just as planned," I replied. "What about him?"

"He just bought the information from me a little while ago... Well, at this point, I can't even tell if your timing is just perfect, or if you predicted him to buy it on this exact day."

"I just got lucky. I figured he'd make his move soon, anyway."

"Is that so? Well, it doesn't really matter. Just be sure to give me the date when the time comes. Sakuragaoka Academy's higher-ups weren't happy with how sudden the request was. But because of Chairman Sakayanagi's position and that school's relation to their former student, they can't just decline the request, even if they don't know the details."

"It's vague, but I'm surprised they didn't buy the reason. It's not like we were lying."

"Saying that it's 'vital for making a promising student like Kushida Kikyou overcome her past', wouldn't be enough."

"But they still accepted in the end. The higher-ups were most likely delighted with the fact that the chairman himself seemed to favor Kikyou. If someone like her becomes a prominent figure in this school, Sakuragaoka would gain more prestige."

"Exactly."

I figured that much. That's why I wasn't worried about the chairman's "request" getting declined.

"For now, I'm just glad they're being cooperative. This shouldn't last too long. We'll reach the climax soon, and after that, everything will be back to normal for that school," I said. "How about you, Sensei? Aren't you curious about what this plan entails?"

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, but you don't have to worry about me doing anything unnecessary. If possible, you can tell me about it after everything's over."

"I'm grateful. It's nice to have one less person to worry about."

"We're on the same side. And it's the least I could do to help. Besides, even if I don't know the details of your plan, I can at least understand that the whole class will benefit in the long run if you succeed."

"I guess that's true."

The stage is nearly complete. Unless this is dealt with, I don't think I can move on to the next phase of my plan without unnecessary risks.

"By the way, it's not just her that's getting targeted. It seems like the existence of the ID holder has been found out."

"It was only a matter of time. The traitor must've leaked it."

"Student #1100, huh? Well, since he's just getting hunted, that means his identity is still unknown to the traitor."

"They probably think it's me."

"Not that it would make a difference even if it is you, right?"

"You overestimate me. Even I would give in if too much trouble piled up on me."

"Is that so? Then I guess I can't really blame you for stepping down."

If only things were that easy.

"Say, Ayanokouji... What do you plan to do with the traitor?"

"If they drop out or get expelled, the class will pay dearly. I won't let that happen if that's what you're worried about."

"I can't really deny that I'm worried about that. But as a teacher, it's not like I'm entirely enthusiastic about getting my student intentionally expelled."

"I guess you have a point."

"That said, I also don't plan on telling you what to do. If you deem the traitor's expulsion necessary, then you're free to do so. For your methods... Well, it's better if I don't have to get involved."

"I know. Don't worry."

After a brief silence, Chabashira-sensei sighed and ended the conversation.

"Alright. Do tell me if any changes occur. I'll do the same if anything happens on my end."

"Thank you for your cooperation."

"You sound like a tech support service employee."

"I get that a lot."

And then she hung up.

To be honest, I'm still impressed that the chairman managed to fulfill my request.

"I wonder what he'll ask of me in the future... Just thinking about it is giving me a headache..."

Anyway, the wild goose chase I've prepared should be over by now. It won't take too long before everything comes together for the finale.

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Kikuchi Eita

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Male

Birthday: May 7th

Height: 171 cm (5'6")

Hair Color: Platinum Silver

Eye Color: Vermilion

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: C-

Intelligence: C

Decision-Making: C

Physical Ability: C

Cooperativeness: B

Personality: Kikuchi is an amiable and approachable person. He managed to make many friends because of this. He is also described as mature by most of his classmates, and some girls secretly admire him for this. A lot of the guys also ask for his advice when it comes to relationships due to his past relationship experience during middle school, which became known in his circle thanks to his friend, Onizuka

Kiyoshi's blabbering. Most girls feel comfortable with him due to his nonchalance and relaxed demeanor around them.

Hobbies: Kikuchi generally keeps to himself as he likes to read classic Japanese novels-- a hobby he got from his grandfather. He started listening to rock music during middle school. He also likes teasing his friends, regardless if they are boys or girls.

Abilities: Despite his lack of academic and physical abilities, Kikuchi's intellect isn't to be underestimated. On a good day, he is able to read everyone's thought processes by simply observing their words and facial expressions. Kikuchi is also capable of complex thought processes with the condition of being very invested and interested in whatever he is thinking about. The condition of this ability is similar to Professor's memorization ability. His intelligence, decision-making skills, and tactical prowess can be on par with the likes of Ryuen Kakeru or Katsuragi Kouhei if he takes things seriously. That said, even he isn't aware of his own potential yet.

Gallery:

(Kikuchi's looks are based on Nagisa Kaworu from Evangelion.)

Vol. 6: Chapter 4.2 - Ryuuen's Message

November 7th, Sunday.

Ike went to Keyaki Mall's bathroom after he and his friends finished watching a movie. The other three went on to order food for their group at the food court. After he got out, however, three different people were waiting for him.

"Ike," Ishizaki called out to him in a relatively friendly manner.

"Ishizaki... Komiya... and Kaneda? What do you want?" he asked vigilantly.

"C'mon, dude. Don't be like that. We were just hanging out like normal students. Is it wrong to greet an acquaintance?"

"I don't have time for this, Ishizaki. Just get straight to the point," spat Ike.

"You guys from Class A are so uptight. We're not tryna be assholes because we want to, okay? Well, I guess you can hold some grudge against me because I punched you before..." Ishizaki scratched his cheek with a guilty smile. "But orders are orders, and we need to follow them if we want to gain more points."

Ike's rigid expression became less guarded after hearing Ishizaki's reply. After thinking about it for a second, Ryuuen's goons never really bothered them unless they had other motives.

"Fine. But it's not like we're friends, so I'm sure you have some sort of objective for calling out to me."

Ike's hunch was right on the money, and Ishizaki readily admitted it.

"Yeah, actually. Ryuuen-san wanted us to give your group a message."

"Message? My group?"

"You, Hondou, Miyamoto, Yamauchi... and two other guys, right?"

"Ohh, I see... But a message from Ryuuen, huh...?" Ike's skepticism returned.

"Don't get the wrong idea. It's just some details related to what happened before when we tried to frame you guys."

Ike's eyes narrowed as he started to clench his fists.

"You say that as if you didn't just try to ruin our lives with false accusations."

"I'm not going to invalidate how you feel, but it was the strategy

that Ryuuen-san thought of back then."

Ike grew increasingly irritated the more he heard about the topic.

"Ugh, just tell me already. I wanna get back and eat."

"Alright, alright. But remember, we wanted your whole group to know. Take us to where you guys are seated. We'll tell you everything there."

Ike didn't reply, but instead glanced at Komiya and Kaneda, who stayed quiet the entire time.

"Don't worry, man. We're not bullshitting you. We just really wanted to give you guys the message," Komiya shrugged.

"Mhm," Kaneda nodded with a knowing smile.

Seeing their serious expressions, Ike had no choice but to cast his doubts aside for now. He took them to where his friends were waiting. When they arrived, Yamauchi and the others were surprised to see their buddy accompanied by three students from a rival class.

After Ike explained the situation, they finally chose to listen despite being on guard.

"We were originally planning to tell you at school, but it's better to tell you now while we got the chance. I guess it's fine even if it's just the four of you since the other two weren't really involved during the incident," said Ishizaki. "Alright. Kaneda, I'll leave everything to you since you remember all of the details."

The so-called "incident" was already resolved, but it was still a fact that Ike and Yamauchi were the victims. They couldn't really guess what Ryuuen had to say, but the way they were "saved" was still a mystery to them. After all, Horikita and Ayanokouji miraculously managed to make Class D back off from the case.

"Then, to start, do you know what this is?" Kaneda asked, placing a small item on the table.

"Hm...?"

"What's that?"

It didn't seem like any of them were familiar with the item.

"That's a bug-- a listening device," replied Komiya.

"What?!"

"For real?!"

"They sell that stuff here in school?!"

"Quiet down, will ya?" Ishizaki groaned in irritation. "We also just found out about this thing yesterday when Ryuuen-san showed it to us. He managed to find a store that sells it so he bought one."

"A bug, huh...? That's wild but... what's that got to do with this?" asked Hondou.

"The reason why we were forced to back off... was because of these bugs. The whole incident was recorded by someone," replied

Kaneda.

"Huh-? Wait, wait, wait... That just raises so many questions..." Miyamoto tilted his head in confusion. "First of all, when and where were the bugs planted?"

"According to Hirata and Horikita-chan, it was Ayanokouji's strategy that saved us... Does that mean he was the one who recorded everything using bugs?" asked Yamauchi.

"Yes. Ryuen-shi thinks so, too. As for how he did it, Ryuen-shi also has an idea, but it's still up for you guys to remember."

"Hmm... Well, Ayanokouji was pretty involved when it happened. Soshi and I were his accomplices in guarding these two since we already suspected that Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san's confessions were some form of attack against our class," said Hondou.

Ike and Yamauchi looked down with bitter expressions. They couldn't help but remember what happened.

"-?!" Miyamoto suddenly perked up causing them to look at him. "Haruki, Kanji... On that day--do you remember when Ayanokouji said good luck to you guys?"

When the two of them recalled what happened, everything suddenly became clear.

"Ayanokouji wrapped his arms around our shoulders... It didn't really feel weird at that time, but..."

"So he planted the bugs on us during that moment...?"

"I guess that checks out, then. Ryuen-san's hunch was right..." Ishizaki sighed. "We checked your pockets, remember? Back then, he told us to be on guard against potential recordings, but the only devices he was worried about were smartphones. We never checked what was under your collars, your sleeves, or the hem of your uniforms since you can't really stick your phones there."

"Additionally, Ryuen-san also thoroughly observed Yamauchi's behavior to see if he was just acting. Since you weren't, that means you didn't know you were bugged," added Komiya.

"What the hell? If Ayanokouji had evidence to protect us in the first place, why didn't he use them immediately? Why did he makes go through all of that?! We were treated like criminals, you know?!" Yamauchi asked furiously.

"Well, the short answer is: Ayanokouji-shi wanted to use that evidence as a bargaining chip against Ryuen-shi."

"Hah? Are you fucking kidding me?" said Miyamoto who seemingly popped a nerve after hearing that.

"Hey, Kaneda. Are you sure you're not just trying to rile us up with fake stories?" asked Hondou.

"Well, I'm sure inciting chaos in your class is part of why we had to deliver this message. I don't know Ryuen-shi's true objective for

telling you guys the truths that he found out, but I can at least swear that I'm not adding to anything that he told me."

"That's another thing that I'm confused about. Why now?" asked Ike.

"Ryuuen-shi tested things out before and became convinced that a smartphone's audio recorder application was used to record the incident. This delayed our investigation so much that we only got to the truth yesterday. Ayanokouji-shi must've done some audio engineering to make it seem like he recorded everything using smartphones," answered Kaneda.

"As for what Ayanokouji wanted in exchange; it was Ryuuen-san's cooperation against the former Class A."

"Fuck! So Ayanokouji was just treating us as sacrifices?!" asked Yamauchi.

"Calm down, Haruki. Even if this was all true, we need to confront Ayanokouji first. He must have a reason for this."

"What reason, Ryoutarou? At least Ryuuen had the guts to be upfront with his wickedness. Ayanokouji underhandedly and willingly put Kanji and Haruki under the bus for his own motives. I looked up to Ayanokouji, but after hearing this, it seems like he doesn't even see us as classmates. His friendliness toward us was just a fucking act!"

"I told you to calm down. That goes for you, too, Soshi," Hondou said in a lower voice. "You're not the only one who's pissed at Ayanokouji. I'd punch him right now if I could. But if we wanna get back at him, we should at least hear what he has to say."

"Ryoutarou's right. We're nobodies compared to him so we can't be reckless," Ike followed before addressing Kaneda. "Well? Is that all you have to say?"

"Hmm... I can disclose some more details before we go," he replied. "Horikita-shi was involved during the initial negotiations, so it's very likely for her to know the truth."

"So Horikita-san was just another one of Ayanokouji's accomplices, huh?" Miyamoto muttered softly.

"And she just let it be?" sneered Yamauchi.

"The last person of interest would be Kushida-shi. However, it's debatable whether she was involved in the matter."

"Kikyou-chan? There's no way she'd just let Ayanokouji do this kind of thing," Ike firmly disagreed.

"Now that you mention her, Class D has been pestering everyone about Kikyou since last month. What's the deal with that? Is everyone in your class trying to stalk her or something?" Hondou interrogated.

"W-Well..." Ishizaki averted his eyes, unable to answer.

Kaneda fixed his glasses upright before responding.

"Ryuuen-shi has taken a liking to her. He intends to thoroughly investigate her while also implementing a bit of intimidation tactic. Once he finds enough information about Kushida-shi, he'll use it to solicit her cooperation. We even plan on buying her a seat in our class in the future," Kaneda explained.

"What-?!"

"You're planning to steal Kikyuu-chan away from our class?!"

The four of them turned to Ishizaki and Komiya and saw their unbothered expressions.

"Kanji, Haruki, calm down. If that was really the case, then why are they telling us? It's too much information," mused Miyamoto.

"Because at this point in time, it doesn't matter anymore." Kaneda's lips formed an arc.

The Class A boys' faces turned grim.

"Based on what you said, Ryuuen must've found something out. Is he going to blackmail Kikyuu and make her betray the class?" asked Hondou.

"We won't answer that question. You're free to interpret my words however you want," Kaneda shrugged before standing up. "We've delivered the message and have even given you some additional information. I suppose this conversation was satisfactory for Class A students like you."

"The thing about the incident will be our personal matter, but we'll tell the class about your plan with Kikyuu," said Miyamoto.

"Hmph, by all means. As I've said, it doesn't matter at this point. In fact, you'd only help us by intimidating Kushida-shi even more."

Kaneda walked away with Ishizaki and Komiya in tow. Ike and the others can only click their tongues in frustration.

"Damn it..." Yamauchi murmured.

"Tch... So, how much are we going to believe?" asked Miyamoto.

"I honestly don't know," replied Hondou.

"Everything they said about Ayanokouji fits the bill, but their plan with Kikyuu-chan-- I don't know," answered Ike.

"Putting Kikyuu-chan's matter aside, are you really going to believe them just like that? I know what happened sucks, but we can't let our emotions get the best of us here. As Kaneda said, inciting chaos in our class is part of their plan," said Hondou.

"I get what you're saying, Ryouutarou, especially since this was supposedly a message from that bastard Ryuuen, but there's one detail about the incident that we haven't told you guys yet," replied Yamauchi.

"What...?"

"To be honest, even I almost forgot about it... But after what

Kaneda said, I think everything made more sense than we initially thought." Ike held his chin as he recalled the past.

"What happened...?"

"After we were brought to the infirmary, Ayanokouji grilled us good. In hindsight, he had the right to do so. Haruki and I were at fault, anyway... But his attitude was way too different than what he'd shown everyone. If Ryuuen's message is true, then all of it would be connected to how he acted back then."

Yamauchi and Ike could never forget the sheer difference between the reserved yet friendly Ayanokouji that approached them, and the cold and ruthless Ayanokouji that scolded them.

"In other words, he really just pretended to be our friends." Yamauchi looked down with a scoff.

"So when Ayanokouji asked us to be his accomplice to watch over you two... he already knew that the plan would fail...?" said Hondou.

"That fucking guy..."

"We'll get the truth out of him at school."

In the end, they left the food court after eating and went straight home. Ike decided to message Ayanokouji about their intentions to talk.

Meanwhile...

My phone rang and saw Ike's name on the notifications.

"So Ryuuen spilled the beans to Ike and the others already, huh? He's finally speeding things up."

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Miyamoto Soshi

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Male

Birthday: September 4th

Height: 174 cm (5'7")

Hair Color: Dark Brown

Eye Color: Dark Brown

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: C-

Intelligence: C-

Decision-Making: C

Physical Ability: C+

Cooperativeness: C

Personality: Miyamoto is the least talkative of the group. However, he also gets riled up when everyone around him is. He is very protective of his friends and would try his best to help them. Lately, Miyamoto is trying to be more open to others so he can increase his circle of friends and connections. He is also one of the few first-year students who have good connections with the second-years. The two main reasons for this would be his desire to stand toe-to-toe with the popular guys in the class-- and his desire to get closer to his crush, a second-year female student.

Hobbies: Miyamoto, much like his friends, try to catch up with trends in order to fit in. That said, he likes to read manga and listen to pop music in his free time.

Abilities: Miyamoto is average in academics and sports. His intelligence is also average. His physical abilities are slightly above average. He doesn't really have any noticeable talents but he can potentially learn sports or other physical activities a bit faster than others if he tried his best.

Gallery:

"I'm just like Ayanokouji fr fr."

Vol. 6: Chapter 4.3 - Think Again

More than half of the class left the room for our lunch break as soon as the bell rang and even more students would be on their way after a little while. Ike's group walked to the back corner of the classroom, right where I was seated. With the way they gathered to approach me, the remaining students curiously turned to us.

"Are you guys sure that you wanna talk about it here?" I asked.

"Heh, why? Are you scared that someone might hear us?" Yamauchi affronted.

"You got it backward, Yamauchi. I'm asking this for your guys' sake."

"What?"

My response displeased them, but I didn't really care. Meanwhile, Ijuuin and Professor just looked uncomfortable more than anything.

"Do you know why I sent that message to you last night, Ayanokouji?"

Ike had briefly mentioned that they wanted to discuss what *really* happened during that frame-up incident with Class D, but that's about it. Well, I don't have the need to play dumb with these guys if they really wanna get into it.

Kikyou wasn't around, which was to be expected since she always goes out with her friends during lunch. Horikita, however, was still seated beside me. She looked confused about the sudden development.

"Based on the way you're acting, Ryuen or someone from his side probably told you some stuff."

"Wha-? How the heck did you know?"

They all seem surprised, but there wasn't really any other answer.

"I mean, who else would it be?"

"Hehhh, so you won't try to act ignorant, huh? What do you have to say about it, then?" asked Hondou.

"Hmmm... Well, despite his personality, Ryuen probably won't lie about it, so whatever they told you-- just treat them as true."

They're probably expecting me to ask what Ryuen's side told them first to see if I wanted to keep my hands clean.

"Ahh, is that so? So it's true that you just pretended to be our friend during that time? And it's also true that you only see us as

pawns to be sacrificed?" Yamauchi asked with a slightly raised voice.

At this point, Horikita finally understood what was happening. But since I was ignoring her, she knew she didn't have to do anything just yet.

"That's oddly specific. What did they even tell you to think that...?"

"Why don't *you* tell us? Only you know about what really happened," sneered Miyamoto.

"Soshi-dono, Haruki-dono, maybe we could be a little less hostile with our tone..." said Professor.

"And why should we do that? Aren't you pissed, as well?" asked Yamauchi.

"Whether we're pissed or not is irrelevant, Haruki-kun. Kanji-kun said that we'll be discussing things with Ayanokouji-kun. So naturally, I expected a civilized conversation. If you want to start a childish verbal fight, then I won't be participating." Ijuuin made his stance firm which naturally irked Yamauchi and Miyamoto.

"Ah, I get it. So you're siding with Ayanokouji?" Yamauchi prodded at him.

Ijuuin fixed his glasses with a sigh. He seems to be mildly frustrated with how Yamauchi was acting.

"Hideo-kun and I weren't as involved with the incident as much as the four of you. The only side of the argument we know is yours, so we're obviously waiting for Ayanokouji-kun to say his piece. The conversation won't progress properly if we start hurling passive-aggressive jabs at each other, will it?"

"Whatever, Wataru. You and Professor can just shut up and listen if you're not interested in siding with your friends," said Miyamoto.

"I'm siding with whoever is right. Since that's still unclear, then I'll be on the neutral side. How about you, Hideo-kun?"

"I-I'm with Wataru-dono on this one," Professor answered, feigning composure.

"Are you guys done? I wanna finish this as soon as possible, though. Lunchtime won't last forever, after all."

Hearing my unbothered voice, Miyamoto narrowed his eyes in annoyance.

"Then tell us the damn truth," he said.

"As far as I remember, the only thing I hid from you guys was the fact that I planted some bugs under your collars," I answered in a casual tone.

Horikita widened her eyes in surprise. She probably didn't expect me to say it outright.

"Ahh, so doing a messed up thing like that isn't a big deal for

someone like you, huh?" Miyamoto scoffed at my response.

"Those were my trump cards if my initial plan with you and Hondou ever failed. If Kinoshita and Manabe's confessions were real, then I would've told you everything before getting rid of the bugs. I'd have no reason to keep those recordings with me, after all."

I could see Horikita skeptically raising an eyebrow. Hey, I *would* tell them the truth-- but only if I didn't have the means to retrieve the bugs secretly.

"What...? If their confessions were real, then you would've told us about the bugs...? Why does that matter?! Why couldn't you tell us even if they *weren't* real?!" Yamauchi argued.

"It's already a problem that you bugged them in secret, but..." Hondou added.

"It's even worse that you didn't immediately use the recording to prevent them from getting accused in the first place!" followed Miyamoto.

"Haruki, Soshi, you're voices are getting too loud... But you guys are right. Ayanokouji, you could've prevented us from being treated like criminals, but you didn't. Do you how Haruki and I felt during that time?" asked Ike.

"Of course, not! You're the popular guy who gets everything he wants!" followed Yamauchi.

At this point, the remaining students inside the classroom listened intently. Some of the girls cringed at Yamauchi's bitter jealousy and blatant projecting.

"There's a reason why I hid it from you guys," I replied. "I needed to prevent Ryuuen from knowing the existence of these bugs as much as possible. He's the kind of guy who would use it without a care in the world. Given the past two special exams, could you imagine the advantage Class D would have if Ryuuen had access to those bugs? That's also the reason why I couldn't use the recordings as soon as I got them. I needed to make it sound like I used smartphones."

Since there were no metal detectors around, Ryuuen could've sneaked in a few bugs inside the deserted island. And while using phones during the Zodiac Exam wasn't prohibited, taking advantage of a bug's small size would make it easier to utilize.

"And for that purpose... you just let us go through all of that?"

"Through all of what, Yamauchi? The few students from Ryuuen's class who mocked you were just acting since they know the truth. You were treated like criminals? By whom? Everyone in our class knew that you guys were set up. And the incident never went public either so no one else knew what you guys were accused of," I explained.

With his argument shut down to the ground, Yamauchi could only grind his teeth in anger. Ike and the other two looked down with extremely bitter faces.

Well, since they went through all this effort to get chastized, I'll give them what they want.

"Do you know why you *felt* like you were treated like criminals? That's because no one inside the class voiced their support for you. I already warned everyone to be careful because Ken almost got in trouble, but you still continued interacting with Class D students without being careful. And it doesn't help that your reputation is often associated with words like "*idiot*" and "*pervert*". Even if our classmates knew the truth, they wouldn't bother showing concern for people who dig their own graves."

"You-!" Miyamoto tried to grab me, but Hondou stopped him.

"Ayanokouji, could you stop talking like you know everything about my friends?" Hondou asked.

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know."

"Is that so? You sure sound like a smartass right now, though," he said.

"Do I? Sorry, if that's the case, but it's not like I'm talking without any basis. What I just said was a product of what Yamauchi and Ike had been showing since the start of school. I'm actually pretty confident that almost all of our classmates will be on my side if we give them all of the information we have."

"Oh, you're confident, alright."

"I am. You're smart enough to know that I'm right, Hondou," I replied, giving him a side-eye.

"So no one cares if we were used as sacrifices?!" continued Yamauchi.

"Sacrifices? You're still saying that? Frankly, I don't think anyone cares about what happened anymore-- even you guys. Nothing really changed since that incident apart from our class reaching Class A. You're trying to condemn me for what I did, but it's precisely because of what I did that you're leisurely enjoying your high school life right now."

"That-!"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying this because I want your gratitude. I couldn't care less about what you feel, but at least don't go out of your way to bother me," I sighed. "I've said this before and I'll say it again, Yamauchi. You wouldn't have been in that situation if you guys didn't let your crotches do the thinking."

Kikuchi, Mori, Yukimura, Ueno, Matsushita, Satou, Maezono, and Kouenji. These were the eight other students inside the classroom that witnessed what was happening.

"If you think I just pretended to be your friend because I'm acting very differently from what I've shown you in the past, then I advise you to think again. I managed to anticipate everything that Ryuuken did, so... if I really wanted to use you guys as sacrifices, you wouldn't be standing in front of me right now."

Name of Student: Hondou Ryouutarou

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Male

Birthday: August 11th

Height: 164 cm (5'4")

Hair Color: Powder Blue/Steel Blue

Eye Color: Green

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: C-

Intelligence: C

Decision-Making: C

Physical Ability: C

Cooperativeness: C +

Personality: Hondou isn't loud compared to his friends, Ike and Yamauchi. However, just like his other friend, Miyamoto, he vibes with them just as much when they're having fun. He is a laid-back person who spends most of his time using his phone to play games or chat with other people. Although not as much as Ike and Yamauchi, Hondou is also a bit bitter about the difference in social status between guys. However, seeing someone gloomy like Ayanokouji Kiyotaka become popular, he and Miyamoto decided to see if they can turn things around by being sociable. While Miyamoto's connections are strong with the second-years, Hondou has made a lot of acquaintances with the first-years. Even his classmates are starting to recognize his and Miyamoto's change, though most of them notice Hondou since Miyamoto is mostly interacting with second-years.

Hobbies: Hondou likes to play gacha games, visual novels, and dating sims which made him get along with Professor and Ijuuin pretty easily. That said, he often presents himself as someone with normie taste. While it is true that he consumes mainstream media and regularly listens to trendy music, it's more of a tactic rather than a passion.

Abilities: Compared to his other friends, Hondou is more intelligent and cunning. He is very methodical despite his lack of academic prowess and average physical ability. He is known for his lack of presence and

takes advantage of it to remain lowkey during the first semester. Hondou's social abilities are above average. His way of talking and friendly nature almost makes him as charismatic as someone like Ike.

Gallery:

Vol. 6: Chapter 5.1 - A Matter of Principle

Before we knew it, it was already the 12th of November. It's been a month since Horikita Manabu's final address. Since it's a Friday, the Ayanokouji Group will have its fourth study session.

Everything felt the same for most of us until a few days prior. A number of changes occurred within the class.

"Hey, Ayanokouji." A classmate sneaked up behind me.

"Oh, Hondou."

"You're really stone-cold, aren'tcha? I thought my stealthy presence would work on you, but you didn't even flinch," he said.

"Well, it's not that surprising. You knew I was coming, didn't you?"

"Not really. It doesn't show on my face, but I did get surprised."

"Haha, is that so?" Hondou chuckled before shifting his attention to the book I was holding. "Ohh! Is that the new volume for *Dr. Stone*? That was just released about a week ago!"

"The school got some copies during the restock, apparently. Professor got it on the day."

"Man, I wanna read it, too. But I'm sure there are a lot of customers lined up for it. I can't really use my *friend card* to get easier access anymore."

His melancholic words caused the mood to dampen a bit.

"Did the four of you really stop being friends with Professor and Ijuuin?" I asked.

"I guess so. It sucks, but I also feel like it's better if we're not buddies anymore. Those two seem like they're doing great on their own, anyway. Even with their hobbies, it looks like they get along with our classmates just fine."

I guess we're already at that time when things like anime, manga, and games are acceptable as hobbies. Some even find them cool on the normie side.

"Sorry, I guess."

"Oh, please. An apology from you would feel cheap since you didn't really do anything."

"Yamauchi and Miyamoto would beg to differ."

Four days ago, I successfully defended my case, leaving Ike, Yamauchi, Hondou, and Miyamoto unable to argue back and press their accusations further. Ijuuin and Professor were convinced that what I did was for the best. As for the "*damage*" done to the

"victims"...

"Haruki-kun and Kanji-kun only have themselves to blame."

Ijuuin's words and Professor's support behind them were crystal clear.

Of course, Miyamoto and Yamauchi saw this as another act of betrayal. Ike and Hondou didn't lash out as hard as them, but they were also severely disappointed by Ijuuin and Professor's decision. In the end, the conclusion of that little discussion wasn't anything concrete. I left the room to eat lunch, and Horikita followed me out to have a conversation about what just happened.

I talked to Professor and Ijuuin via chat later that day, and they told me that the two of them would probably start distancing themselves from Ike and the others.

"Haruki and Soshi, huh? They're just being immature... But I'm not sure if they're just failing to realize how stupid they're being... or if they know what they're doing, but are just too prideful to admit it."

"I guess... I can see where they're coming from."

"Heh. I guess even the great Ayanokouji Kiyotaka dreads the idea of losing, huh?"

"It's the same for most people. Some might try to act tough, but there's no way to *not* feel bad after taking a loss."

And besides, it's not really about losing. Their ego won't allow themselves to take the blame, especially Yamauchi.

Hondou crossed his arms, sighing exasperatedly.

"I was upset, too. And even now, I still don't feel like I can see you the way I did before. That goes double for Haruki and Kanji who were essentially your victims, and triple for Soshi, who's really protective of his friends. Those three can't even bring themselves to talk to you. Our classmates are starting to notice their behavior towards you, but given Haruki and Kanji's reputations, I doubt any of them would even bother asking."

That might not necessarily be the case. Ike's image inside the class is noticeably better than Yamauchi's. And Shinohara is getting along pretty well with him lately, so she might ask him about what happened. I could try to confirm this through Hondou right now, but I don't think this guy would be willing to have a friendly gossip with me anymore.

Well, the less people who know, the better. I made sure to warn them that it wouldn't go well if they try to tell others about what happened, mainly because it'll backfire on them. And it doesn't seem like any of the students who were inside the classroom at that time are spreading it around, too.

"So, why did you talk to me?" I asked.

"Just wanted to give you a heads-up. It's not getting better for the three of them, so they're holding some grudge against you. I'll try my best to stop them from doing anything reckless, but that's because I'm worried about *them*-- not you... Given your abilities and connections, you can probably destroy my friends if you want to, so I need to stop them from going against you in any way. Of course, I wouldn't side with them if they were in the wrong, but I'm still their friend, so I want to prevent things from escalating in the first place."

"You've thought this through, Hondou."

"I'm just trying to make things better for us," he replied before glaring back at me. "It's not just them, Ayanokouji. Even if you were in the right, I still hate your guts. You've got looks, abilities, and influence-- you're a high-spec person compared to us mediocre trash. But that doesn't mean you can just try to manipulate things behind the scene and pull our strings like mindless puppets."

"Well, you're free to look at what I did however you want. I won't try to argue with you."

A few seconds passed as the two of us stared at each other.

"Hahaha. That was pretty hypocritical of me. My bad, my bad," Hondou shrugged as he shook his head. "After all, if I had your abilities, I would probably do the same things that you did."

I can already guess the kind of mindset you have, Hondou. If really had my abilities, you would probably use them for trivial things like fame and clout.

But then again, that's only if you managed to acquire those abilities right here and now. I'm sure things would be different if you were cultivated to have them since birth.

"It's just a matter of principle," I said.

"Yeah. Kanji and Haruki were at fault for that incident, so I won't try to defend them. Even an idiot like me can understand that," Hondou replied before walking away.

I don't blame you for feeling that way. But unfortunately, this world is divided between two types of people-- the weak and the strong. The strong run the world... but the weak will fall behind. It's cruel, but the world won't slow down for them. Those who are strong enough to manipulate others will inevitably end up doing so. But whether it's for protection or harm-- Well, that's not for the weak to decide.

Name of Student: Ijuuin Wataru

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Male

Birthday: March 25th

Height: 165 cm (5'4")

Hair Color: Black

Eye Color: Brown

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: A-

Intelligence: B+

Decision-Making: C

Physical Ability: D-

Cooperativeness: B

Personality: Ijuuin is a gentle boy who prefers to enjoy his hobbies in a comfortable space. He is more than willing to socialize with others as long as they start the conversation, or they give him enough leeway to start the conversation himself. He is honest with his words but is also considerate. Ijuuin is a tender speaker but gets easily excited when talking about the things he likes.

Hobbies: Ijuuin is an otaku much like Professor, but his amiable nature makes him very approachable. He likes to play visual novels and life-simulation games. While Professor prefers rock songs that mainly originate from anime, Ijuuin prefers Japanese Pop music and idol music.

Abilities: Ijuuin is one of the academic powerhouses of the class. He was chosen as "Student #1100", the manager of the class bank. His ability to organize things efficiently perfectly complements Professor's memorization ability. He is very decisive and will rarely crack under pressure.

Gallery:

Vol. 6: Chapter 5.2 - Weakness and Detriment

"Hooray! Kiyopon's going to help in teaching us today!"

"I don't think I'd be that much help at this point. I'm sure Yukimura has done a good job with tutoring you guys," I said.

"Well, yeah. I actually found it really easy to understand," nodded Ken.

Some steps behind us were Akito and Airi who chatted with Professor and Ijuuin as our group walked to the library. It was time for the Ayanokouji Group's fourth study session. Next week would be the last, and after that, none of the groups are no longer required to study with their group mates. That said, I'm sure we're all used to each other by now. I don't think anyone would feel uncomfortable continuing their studies with others.

"This is good. We've got some space left. You guys head to our table and prepare the study materials. Ayanokouji and I will get some reference books," commanded Yukimura.

The two of us separated from the group and explored the shelves.

"How's everyone doing?" I asked.

"Normal, I guess. Sakura is by far the weakest in terms of progress, but I can see her effort. She'll be fine as long as her enthusiasm doesn't drop."

"That's good. Ken seems comfortable with your methods, too."

"Sudou, huh...?" Yukimura looked down with a slightly dejected expression. "I apologized to him about this before. Back then, I really looked down on him. I thought he was a no-good delinquent who had no hopes of graduating. I always topped the written exams and contributed heavily to our rankings... But during the Sports Festival, the difference between us became clear."

"If you're talking about Sudou's athleticism, then I don't think you should feel bad about it. As you've said, you're our ace when it comes to academics. You two are just about equal in terms of being an asset to the class."

Yukimura smiled wryly, shaking his head.

"I don't think so. Sudou's academics were absolutely horrible at first, but he's been studying hard ever since the start of school. It wouldn't take long before he could overtake the top twenty to

fifteen spots in our class during written exams. In other words, he's not a detriment even with his weakness... Meanwhile, my severe lack of athleticism cost us a lot of points. Even during the Island Exam, I couldn't help much because my stamina isn't high," he explained. "Unlike Sudou, I'm a detriment with my weakness."

In basketball terms, Ken would still do alright even when playing on an Away Court. On the other hand, Yukimura would do terribly anywhere other than his Home Court-- or so I've learned.

He's such an uptight and serious guy, much like a certain girl.

"What about Hirata then?" I asked while tucking a pile of books in my arm.

"Hirata...?"

"He's always in the top five during exams but he's also one of the most athletic guys in class."

"W-Well..."

"How about me? Hirata scores more in exams but I'm slightly more athletic than him. We're just about the same in terms of abilities."

"You and Hirata... Well, you guys are different."

"You're still looking down on Ken, Yukimura," I shrugged. "You've come to a compromise with yourself that you and Ken just have different expertise, and you were convinced that the two of you should at least be on equal footing... But now, you think he's better than you in overall contribution, and your pride is taking a hit."

Yukimura's face became contorted after hearing my words.

"That..."

If he didn't respect me as a former class leader, I'm sure he would've lashed out.

"That's just my opinion based on what I heard from you. I don't think you're unnecessarily arrogant like Kouenji. It's normal to take pride in the things you're good at."

It's not like we're close enough for me to casually lecture him. If my words come off as preaching, I'd be a hypocrite who thinks he's better than everyone else. Then again, Yukimura probably wanted to know what I thought about his situation. He wouldn't have opened up to me, otherwise.

"As a classmate, I don't see you guys any differently. There's no point in categorizing people for no reason. Don't worry about it too much and just focus on what you're good at," I tapped Yukimura's shoulder as I made my way to our table.

"I like studying and I hate physical activities... But I don't want to be a burden to the class. I was probably assigned to Class D because of my poor physique. Even if we're in Class A now, is it really fine for me to stay this way?"

Change is inevitable. Even if you don't, those around you certainly will.

"That depends on you. You're plenty helpful to the class already, Yukimura. And I'm sure Horikita will take your weakness into account. But if you want to work out and shape up a bit, then there's nothing wrong with that either."

"I see... I understand, Ayanokouji. I'll give it some serious thought."

I nodded in response.

With that, the study session officially started. Everyone was doing well. Given their current state, they'll be fine as individuals.

"I'm relieved that Sudou-kun is my partner. I didn't think you were so studious," said Ijuuin.

"I wasn't. I guess having people around you makes a difference," Ken shrugged with a smile.

He still hates studying alone, saying he can't focus. But it's good that he's taking things seriously during every study session.

"You're quite lucky, Airi. With an honor student like Azuma-san as your partner, you don't have to worry about getting dragged down," said Akito.

"Well, yes. But on the other hand, I'm worried about dragging *her* down." Airi scratched her cheek with a finger, looking worried.

"Our partner, huh...? In terms of being in the top half, I'd say Horikita and I are the most vulnerable. Ike and Yamauchi are the most likely to fail if they don't study properly," said Yukimura.

"You two have it hard, huh, Yukimuu?"

"Yukimuu?"

"Well, I'm sure you and Suzunon will pull through." Haruka gave him a thumbs-up.

"So you're just gonna ignore it, huh...?" Yukimura sighed.

"It's fine, isn't it? We've been studying together for a while now. What's wrong with trying to be close? You feel the same way, right, Watarin, Hideyon?"

"Watarin...?"

"H-H-Hideyon-?"

Ijuuin and Professor were shocked (especially Professor) after suddenly being baptized with new nicknames by a very cute girl.

"Fufun~. Do you guys wanna be part of the Ayanokouji Group?" asked Haruka. "Well, I say that, but there's really nothing official about us. We're just a ragtag team of loners who get together sometimes."

"A ragtag team of loners, huh...? I see. So you're saying that your group doesn't observe the unwritten rules of usual friend groups. To be honest, I've already noticed that even before," Ijuuin turned to

Akito. "I've heard Miyake-kun continuously reject Hasebe-san and Sudou-kun's invitations like they were nothing, but the two of you didn't seem to mind."

"Well, that's just how we are. If we were to suddenly dislike Miyacchi for wanting to be alone, then we're no different from those typical friend groups with annoying hierarchies."

"I also don't like adjustin' my schedule out of nowhere if it's nothin' too important. I understand if someone doesn't wanna hang out."

"I see, I see. There's no stress about not making contact. I can see why Ayanokouji-dono's schedule doesn't feel like that of a normie's," said Professor.

I mostly spend my free time reading manga and light novels, so I can see why Professor would think that. Then again, I'd get lots of messages from different friends and acquaintances, which is pretty distracting.

"It sounds very refreshing. 'Feels as though there wouldn't be any changes in how we're acting even if we join the Ayanokouji Group," said Ijuuin.

"Yep, that's basically it. Apart from a slight increase in the number of people talking to me, I don't really feel like anything has changed in my school life," nodded Akito.

"Is it really okay for us to be part of your group, though?" Professor asked in a tone that was noticeably different from his usual character.

"I'm fine with it as long as everyone else is," answered Ken.

Airi's smiled gently as she agreed in silence.

"Join the Ayanokouji Group, huh...?" pondered Yukimura. "Hmm... I've never been part of a friend group before. I found them unnecessary. But honestly, I don't mind getting along with you guys even after this."

It seems like the energy of the Ayanokouji Group's members gave Yukimura a nice environment to dwell in. I'm sure that Professor and Ijuuin feel the same way.

"How about you guys? Are you joining us or not?" Ken asked the two other bespectacled guys.

"Well, Hasebe-san already gave us some nice nicknames. It would be a shame if we declined the offer," replied Ijuuin.

"Mn, mn." The slightly embarrassed Professor nodded in agreement.

"Alrigh-!" Haruka's excitement was extinguished when Airi and Akito gestured for her to keep it down. "E-Eherm. I almost forgot that we're in the library. Anyway, I want us to call each other by our first names. That's our proof of friendship."

"Eh? Horikita isn't part of the group, right? But you call her Suzunon..."

"This is this, and that is that," Haruka replied with a stiff smile.

"Don't just use that when it's convenient..." bantered Akito.

"How about you, leader? You've been silent this whole time. What are your thoughts on this?" Haruka turned to me, miming a mic near my mouth.

"I don't really mind. I've known all three of them even before this study group was formed. As you guys have said earlier, it doesn't really feel like there are any downsides to this kind of free-for-all group," I replied. "And don't call me 'leader'."

"The leader has spoken~!" Haruka exclaimed with a husky whisper.

After the study session ended, all of them decided to have some fun at Keyaki Mall before going home. They invited me to join, but I still had some duties to fulfill as part of the "question makers".

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Minami Setsuya

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Male

Birthday: April 26th

Height: 185 cm (6'1")

Hair Color: Black/Dark Brown

Eye Color: Brown

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: C+

Intelligence: B

Decision-Making: B-

Physical Ability: B+

Cooperativeness: D-

Personality: Minami could be accurately described as a "Class Jock" much like Sudou Ken. He is very outgoing and prefers to chill with his friends. He picks on them as a sign of friendship and respect. That said, he likes to make fun of people like Ike or Yamauchi who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. After all, he stands amongst the ones at the top. There's Hirata and Ayanokouji who are both respected by guys and well-liked by girls. However, while Minami is very well-respected by the guys, he isn't popular with the girls due to his hot-headedness and childish personality.

Hobbies: Minami likes to play video games. He respects people like Professor or Ijuuin because they are both skilled and knowledgeable about video games. Other than that, he likes to exercise, even buying a pair of dumbbells so he can lift them inside his room. Minami also loves to chew gum. But of course, he could only do so outside of school hours because it's considered as misconduct.

Abilities: Minami is one of the most athletic students in Horikita's class. While he is deemed childish, he finds it uncool to try and show off, that's why his physical abilities are often overshadowed by others. In reality, he is just as athletic as someone like Hirata. He was even a starter for his middle school baseball team.

Gallery:

Vol. 6: Chapter 5.3 - Bibliophile Maiden

"Alright, that's about it." Yukimura arranged the papers and nodded, looking satisfied.

"Will you really not go with us, Kiyopon? It'll be fun! Right, Yukimuu?"

"Y-Yukimuu..."

While Yukimura still looked uncomfortable to be called by a nickname, he was also slowly starting to get used to it.

"Hasebe... Can't you think of bett-"

"No, no. You can't call me Hasebe. It's Haruka-sama now, remember?"

"Wait, where did the '-sama' come from...?" whispered Akito.

"Hmm. Fine, but..."

"What was your first name again, Yukimura? I remember it bein'..." Ken's forehead wrinkled as he tried to recall the name.

"Teruhiko, right?" I asked.

"Stop it, Ayanokouji..." Yukimura's expression became clouded after hearing me say his name. "You can't call me by that name."

"Huh? What'chu mean? Why can't we call you by your first name?" asked Ken.

Everyone turned to him with confused expressions. If it was something that seriously peeved him, I'm sure no one would really mind if Yukimura insisted on being called by his last name. That said, we could at least ask for a reason.

"I... don't like my first name..." he replied.

"Ohh, I see! What do you want to be called, then? I think Yukimuu is cute, so I'll keep calling you that," Haruka smirked at the rest of us. "Fufun~. I doubt anyone else would have the guts to do the same though."

Sensing that it was a personal thing, she immediately tried to mend the situation and lighten up the mood. Good job, Haruka.

"Oh... In that case, you guys can call me Keisei. I'll call you by your first names from now on, too." Yukimura pointed at us, one by one. "Haruka, Airi, Akito, Kiyotaka, Ken, Wataru, and-"

"I don't mind if you keep calling me Professor, you know?" Professor fixed his glasses in a cool fashion.

"S-Sure... Professor," Yukimura-- no, Keisei replied with a stiff smile.

I accompanied them to the door and bid my farewells for the day. I still have some more books to borrow for the exam questions. I could still hear them interview Keisei about his name, but their voices were eventually drowned out by the music playing in the library. As they disappeared from my sight, I went back inside and saw the diminishing number of students.

"Alright. Time to see what this is about."

I walked toward a certain shelf and approached a certain person. It was strange. I made it obvious that I was heading in their direction, but they didn't try to move at all.

"Good evening," the girl said.

"Good evening to you, too," I replied.

The girl smiled faintly. While she didn't intend to continue the conversation herself, she didn't leave either. Seeing this, I felt like I could go straight to the point.

"You're Shiina Hiyori from Class D, right?"

"Yes, that would be me. It's nice to meet you, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun."

"Were you observing us?"

"Well, you could say that... Though it's more accurate to say that I was observing *you* in particular."

"Me, huh? On Ryuen's orders, I assume?"

"Yes," she nodded.

Shiina didn't seem hostile at all. In fact, I felt bad about continuing the conversation while standing.

"Would you like to take a seat?" I asked.

"Oh, thank you. I figured that you'd want to talk to me, that's why I had my classmates head home first."

Like Keisei, Shiina was also tutoring a bunch of Class D students. They were really obedient toward her which was pretty new for an outsider like me who only saw Class D students act subservient around Ryuen.

After sitting on a vacant table nearby, the two of us moved on with our little chat.

"I won't take much of your time. I just wanted to ask you about what you were doing."

"It's nothing much, to be honest. Ryuen-kun asked me to observe you if I can. Did I make you feel uncomfortable? I tried my best to be as stealthy as I can since I didn't want to disturb you."

Shiina had a blank expression, but I felt like she was genuinely concerned.

"Don't worry, it didn't bother me. I was just curious," I replied.

"How many times have you observed me."

"It's only my second time-- on Ryuen-kun's orders. I think you

already know, though."

"I'm just making sure."

I first noticed her two weeks ago during the Ayanokouji group's second study session. I didn't participate in the study session itself, but I used the library with Kikyou and Matsushita to brainstorm some questions.

As Shiina said, though, that's on Ryuen's orders. She basically admitted that she's observed me outside of it. Of course, I knew what she was referring to.

"Ohh, I see. Anything else you want to ask?"

"What did you tell Ryuen about your observations?"

"You really think I'll answer that?" Shiina smiled.

"I know I'm your enemy, but I feel like you'd tell me if I ask properly."

"Wow, you got me there," she giggled. "But please don't think I'll do anything disadvantageous to our class, okay?"

"I see. If you're willing to tell me, then I guess the information you have on me isn't much of note."

"Exactly. Other than seeing you study and interact with your friends, there wasn't really anything else that I could say."

"Figures..."

"Well? Anything else?" Shiina asked.

"Hmm... I don't think so."

"Great. Now that that's over and done, is it alright for me to ask a few questions?"

My answer was met with enthusiastic anticipation. Well, Shiina looked like she wanted to talk about anything *but* the matter with Ryuen.

"Sure. What did you want to ask?"

"Do you like the books of Raymond Chandler?" Shiina's eyes sparkled.

"Oh... Well, yes, kinda."

"I see... What about Agatha Christie?"

"I do."

"What about Wilkie Collins, Conan Doyle, and Dashiell Hammett?"

"A bit, yes, and a little bit... I haven't read all of their books though."

"I see, I see."

Shiina's small hands fidgeted in excitement. Her current smile was the biggest one I've seen so far.

"What about you? Do you like those authors?" I deflected the question.

"Oh, I like Chandler and Collins. I feel pretty neutral about the

others."

"I see. You really like mystery novels, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. Is Ayanokouji-kun the same?"

"To some extent, yes. I read all kinds of genres, but mystery is definitely up there in my top favorites..." I replied before asking.

"Are there any mystery authors whose work you haven't read yet?"

"Hmm..." Shiina held her chin and went into deep thought.

"The fact that you don't have any names off the top of your head is already amazing. Maybe you've read all of them," I joked.

"Oh, no, surely not. My current lifetime won't be enough to accomplish such a feat."

"What about modern ones like James Patterson."

"He's pretty mainstream so I've come across some of his books... Ah, for modern ones, I think I haven't read *Mystic River* by Dennis Lehane. I've planned to for a long time now, but I haven't been able to do it. I don't know any of his other works, though..."

"Ohh, I think I know him. I've seen the trailer for the movie adaptation of *Mystic River* before, but haven't been able to watch it."

My encounter with that story stemmed from a light novel series which had similar events, based on what Ijuuin and Professor had told me.

"I see," she chuckled. "What about you, Ayanokouji-kun? You're pretty knowledgeable yourself. Are there any mystery authors whose works you haven't read yet?"

"Lots-- Dorothy L. Sayers and Ellery Queen, for example."

"Oh, really?" Shiina put her school bag on the table with a *thunk* and opened it. "Are you interested? I actually have some of their books in here."

I stared at her bag where the books poked out from. It looks heavy.

"Um, I think I'm being very sudden about this. Am I bothering you?" she asked, looking worried.

"Not at all," I replied. "But I find it strange. I just didn't think we'd have this kind of conversation. Ryuuken has some beef with our class, so the last thing I'd expect is to have a friendly discussion about books with one of his classmates."

Shiina gave me a relieved smile.

"Please don't worry, I just play along so that Ryuuken-kun doesn't bother me. I've never been interested in conflict. Or is it that you think talking with me will be a problem on its own?" she asked.

"No, not really. I have no personal issues with you."

"I'm glad. We might compete at certain times, but I don't want our class to have personal grudges against each other over trivial

things. I'd prefer we all get along," she said.

As someone who advocates for a normal high school life, I couldn't help but agree with her. That said, the very nature of this school would make Shiina's dreams a bit more difficult to achieve. Of course, it's not that hard for some people. Most students acted like this was a normal high school. Hirata and Kikyuu are friends with lots of students outside our class. The same goes for people like Ichinose.

"Well, I'm a bookworm myself, so talking to someone who's very well-versed in a genre that I like is pretty nice," I said as I browsed her collection.

"I know, right? It's a great feeling. I'm so happy that I finally have someone to talk to. None of my classmates are readers like me, so I'm actually at a bit of a loss."

"I can totally see where you're coming from," I replied.

I've never been able to talk to anyone about classical music. I am aware that it's a nice topic to talk about, but it would be a bit weird to say that it's my main taste. Knowing the current musical landscape, saying that would just give everyone the impression that I'm an elitist or something.

Well, that's how it would be if I hadn't been listening to other music. Ever since I became friends with Professor and Ijuuin, I've taken a liking to Japanese Rock. I could probably hold a proper conversation with other people now.

"If you want to read Sayers, then I definitely recommend *Whose Body*. If you want to read Queen's work, then *The Roman Hat Mystery* might be a good start."

She even has books written by the likes of William Irish, Lawrence Block, Isaac Asimov.

"I see. I'll keep that in mind. You've really got good taste."

"Thank you."

I guess it's time to take a break from light novels and manga and go back to some classical literature.

Before we knew it, it was already past 7:00 in the evening. The library was about to close, so Shiina and I decided to head out.

"Would you like to walk back to the dorms with me?"

"Sure. I don't want to cut our conversation short, either."

Shiina adjusted her bag with some effort. Her sluggish movements showed how much it weighs.

"I'll take your bag," I said.

"Oh, no. I shouldn't bother you with it. I'll be fine."

"It's alright. I want you to tell me about that book you're holding without any distractions."

"I see. If you say so," Shiina smiled, buying my excuse.

We talked the entire way through the road home. With how spirited our conversations have been, I think it's safe to say that I made a friend.

Author's Notes:

Kiyotaka described Hiyori in the canon as odd and creepy due to the stark contrast of her nature from the rest of Ryuen's class at that point in time. Her appearance was extremely sudden, and Kiyotaka didn't know anything about her. She was also overly enthusiastic when it comes to books, which was normal if she was talking to anyone other than Kiyotaka, who was supposed to be an enemy and person of interest. In fact, Kiyotaka didn't even find Hiyori as strange when she was just talking about books. What struck him as odd was when Hiyori invited him to have lunch together.

In this timeline, Kiyotaka still found her strange, but not to the degree that it was in the canon. Reason being the nature of the initial parts of their conversation. Hiyori was upfront about her role even without saying it. And because he didn't have an identity to hide, Kiyotaka didn't need to raise his guard as much. They'd noticed each other in the luxury cruise ship's library before, so to him, it's not like Hiyori appeared out of nowhere. She also invited Kiyotaka to walk home together, which was similar to how she invited him to have lunch together in the canon. But the nature of walking home together when you're already headed in the same place is a bit more natural than inviting someone who may or may not already have plans to eat somewhere else. Finally, Hiyori managed to properly convey her reason for being cordial with Kiyotaka before she tried to close the distance and invite him to walk home with her.

Vol. 6: Chapter 6.1 - Image

"Ah, Kiyotaka-kun!" Kikyō jogged to my side while waving her hand. "Did you wait long?"

"Not really. I just got here," I replied, putting my phone back inside my pocket.

"I asked Matsushita-san again at the last minute, but I guess she couldn't make it."

"That's unfortunate. She did give us her notes last night, though. I think that's more than enough help for us to make some progress today."

"Yup. She's very considerate."

It was a Saturday on the 13th of November when we finally decided to finish up the test questions. Wearing our uniforms, Kikyō and I went to the library to gather the last bit of study materials needed.

Matsushita was assigned to the last lessons that we haven't discussed in class yet but are sure to be on the exam. Thanks to her notes, we can create questions on those lessons without feeling lost. At the same time, Kikyō and I will have an idea about said lessons in advance.

Since the three of us were solely focused on making the questions, our progress has been very smooth. Even if some of our predictions turn out to be off, there will be ample time to do edits. Of course, there's another reason why we're trying to finish them as soon as tomorrow.

A couple of hours passed before our center of attention shifted to some students at a nearby table.

"Is it just me or are they watching us...?" asked Kikyō.

"I think it's been that way ever since we got here. They're Class D students, aren't they?"

"Yeah... That's Manabe-san and her group. I don't think they have a reason to be in the library. They're delinquents who have shit for brains, especially Manabe-san. If Ryūen-kun wasn't their leader, she'd be the queen bee of Class D," Kikyō muttered softly. "It won't change the fact that she's a basic bitch, though."

Damn. She really tore through her, huh?

"Ryūen must've ordered them to keep an eye on us. As far as I know, Hirata and Horikita are also under watch."

"Well, it's good that they're only bothering the four of us."

We were Ryuen's group mates in the Dragon Group. He knew we were the most important people in Class A. There wasn't any reason for him to monitor our classmates.

Kikyou and I made it obvious that we spotted them, so it didn't take long until Manabe's group stood up and left the library. I don't know if Kikyou realized it, but I'm pretty sure Ryuen just wanted to scare us. Whether or not they could obtain information was irrelevant.

"That reminds me... What's the situation with you and Ryuen? Did you manage to confirm whether he has information on your previous school?"

Kikyou's expression turned dark. With no one else around, she could finally show her true face. Her voice was low and her tone was rough.

"I haven't, but I can't imagine him obtaining that information from you or Horikita, though. Horikita is our class leader, so I can't see that girl endangering me when I'm fully cooperating. And while *you* know about the incident, I haven't even told you the name of my previous school."

As far as she knows, her secret should be safe, and she felt secure. That said, she was scared of what Ryuen might do to obtain her secret. Kikyou knew that she was one of the main targets, and since her biggest weapon was her reputation, she thought that Ryuen wanted to destroy it.

"That Ryuen should already know about my true nature after he recorded us behind the gymnasium," she said, dropping his honorifics. "We even had to sacrifice an important card just to make him get rid of it. How the hell did he even get there?"

Back when Kikyou vented out her feelings in the middle of our preparation for the sports festival, Ryuen was quietly hiding nearby. He recorded our conversation and used it as a bargaining chip to nullify our contract of cooperation.

Ryuen knew that a late approach couldn't work since I would detect his movements, so he got there first and waited without moving. He quickly adapted to what he learned *that time*, huh?

"Do you think he waited there for a very long time?"

I already had a rough idea about how it happened, but I wanted to ask Kikyou's opinion.

"I don't think so. Ryuen couldn't have gotten there before our class. He made his presence known to us when he and his goons watched us walk out of the main building."

That's why we never expected anyone to be around the gymnasium in the first place.

"And a lot of our classmates were going in and out of that area to use the restroom or water station. They would've made a commotion if they saw Ryuuen snooping around..." Kikyou continued. "But then again, it's not like there was a constant flow of students. He could've squeezed in when no one was looking..."

"In other words, he managed to hide from us because his timing was perfect."

"Ryuuen was... lucky...?" Kikyou's eyes widened as she realized something. "Don't tell me-?!"

Kikyou composed herself and reflexively looked at the librarian, who had a serene smile. She must've pretended not to hear us out of consideration.

After arranging our things, the two of us bowed our heads to the librarian and walked out of the library. Kikyou wanted to continue the conversation.

"Kiyotaka-kun, are you saying that the traitor, Kikuchi-kun, was in contact with Ryuuen so he can find the right timing?" she asked, whisperingly.

"That would make sense."

Since Sakayanagi was using Kikuchi, it would make sense for Ryuuen, her accomplice, to take advantage of him, too. But...

"Since Kikuchi-kun isn't really our enemy, does that mean it was Ryuuen's idea? But it's not like Ryuuen already knew that I was hiding something..."

"I think so, too. The probable explanation would be a... coincidence."

"Coincidence?"

"Yeah. I don't think even Ryuuen expected to get something out of that recording at all. You could say that that was the lucky part for him."

"Conversely, it was a great misfortune for us... Ughhhh, if only I waited until the class ended!"

"I don't think you should blame yourself, though. You've been bottling up a lot of emotions back then."

"Well, yeah... I was already at my limit. I think everyone would start to notice something wrong if I held my frustrations inside any longer."

In the end, Kikyou decided to should drop the topic as we got out of the school's premises. A short walk to Keyaki Mall was all it took to be surrounded by lots of people, after all. We entered a popular family restaurant to have our afternoon snack.

"Hey there, Kushida-chan."

"Rena-senpai, good afternoon."

Every time we go out, Kikyou would be greeted by many

students, including seniors. I stopped being surprised at some point, but you can never really get used to it.

"You're Ayanokouji-kun, right? It's nice to meet you. I'm Kawauchi Rena, from Class 3-B."

"Good afternoon, Kawauchi-senpai. Nice to meet you, too."

"Well then, I just wanted to say hi. Bye~."

"Bye, Rena-senpai~!" Kikyou happily waved her hand.

At first, these types of encounters would earn me a lot of curious looks. But around the middle of the second semester, seniors would just straight-up introduce themselves to me. I was already known as a close friend of Kikyou, but as my face got more recognized, especially after the sports festival, everyone just stopped categorizing me as a random friend of Kikyou.

This knowledge was, in part, thanks to Iida-senpai and Konishi-senpai.

"It feels nice to have a simple friendly conversation. People asking me if you're my boyfriend has gone on for far too long..." Kikyou sighed.

"Sorry about that."

"What are you apologizing for? It's annoying for you, too, right?"

"That's true."

The number of times others asked me if I was dating Kikyou-- I can already feel myself getting drained just thinking about it.

"Well... This much is normal if you're popular. Good-looking boys like Tsukasaki-kun, Satonaka-kun, and Hirata-kun are very popular. Your name was among them, too, you know? Especially during the first semester."

"Right..."

I was aware, thanks to Minamikata showing me some sort of ranking back then.

"For girls, Ichinose-san and I are very popular. That's especially true for Ichinose-san since she's the very high-profile leader of Class C. She's even a member of the student council. Even Horikita-san's name started gathering some buzz. The leader of the class who started from the bottom and reached the top in one measly semester-- she's bound to get a lot of attention."

Our orders have arrived. Kikyou and I started eating, but our conversation didn't end there.

Well, it was more like a lecture rather than a conversation. The number of times she'd opened the reality of the social world to me was more than I could count. As someone who can be a bit ignorant in that aspect, I can't thank her enough.

"What do others think of me, anyway...?"

I can't help but wonder about that.

"Finally up for some ego-surfing, huh?"

I guess you could call it that. And Kikyō would be the search engine who could give me the answer.

"To the students of ANHS, who is Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?" she asked herself out loud. "Well, I'm confident that I can give you a good answer. 'Care to listen?"

The people inside the restaurant were all students, but none of them were second-years. And even then, all of them were minding their own businesses. We're probably safe.

"Alright," I nodded.

Kikyō drank from her glass of juice before crossing her arms in thought.

"Let's start with the first-years. I'm sure you're already familiar with them, so before I say anything, is it okay if you tell me what you think?"

"Hmm... During the first semester, my academic abilities made me popular. Even I was aware of that. But since my grades slowly dropped, I guess everyone just thinks of me as one of the honor students now."

Only a handful of students outside the class knew my physical abilities from my swimming record. Even then, I still think most first-years didn't think I was unathletic. Of course, that impression was solidified after my performance during the sports festival. So if we wanted to get technical, the first-year students probably thought of me as a very athletic honor student, similar to someone like Hirata.

"Right! But that's not all. You're also good-looking, so your popularity in that aspect was almost on par with Hirata-kun."

"But objectively speaking, I'm sure everyone would lose interest as soon as the novelty disappears, right? I wasn't as socially active as Hirata outside the class. I didn't even join any clubs."

"That might be true, but it's not like you were totally *inactive*. You're good friends with Ichinose-san, and her classmates seem to favor you."

"I guess you're right... But that's as far as I've gotten."

"Yeah... Probably..."

Kikyō made a complicated face. She looked like she didn't want to agree.

"Let's talk about the second-years now!" To prevent the atmosphere from becoming awkward, Kikyō decided to move the conversation forward.

"Sure. I'm not really well-acquainted with anyone from the upper years aside from Iida-senpai and Konishi-senpai."

I guess you can include Horikita's older brother, but I can't really

say for sure.

"Ohh, you're right. In fact, we don't really need to separate them. We can talk about the two upper years in tandem," Kikyuu shrugged.

I nodded in response.

"Hmm, I guess when it comes to our seniors, your image mostly relies on your involvement with me. At first, the guys thought you were a classmate that I hung out with because you were a loner I felt pity for. Some even assumed that you were being bullied."

"It's not that surprising. I was often called gloomy, after all."

"Exactly. I insisted that you were my best friend, though. And since a lot of those boys liked me, they kinda lost their minds."

According to Iida-senpai, the senior guys were talking about a certain best friend of Kushida Kikyuu. Of course, that person turned out to be me. And as expected, they'd feel pretty jealous.

"So that image goes for *both* the second-year and third-year students, huh?"

"Not until recently. You were the talk of the whole school after the sports festival. I mean, racing against the current and former student council presidents *and* winning-- you sure put on a show..."

"I guess so."

"I wanna ask about that in detail, but it can wait." Kikyuu giggled before scooping up the last of her parfait. "And that's how others see Ayanokouji Kiyotaka! Of course, it varies even further from person to person."

That much is obvious. But now, I've got a good grasp of how I should act from here on out.

"Thanks for enlightening me, as usual, Kikyuu."

"It's a pleasure, Kiyotaka-kun~."

After we got out of the restaurant, she stretched her arms forward with a moan.

"I'm tired~! Let's head back."

"Sure," I replied.

It was around 4:30 in the afternoon. Keyaki Mall was still filled with students. But since it was a Saturday, only a few of them wore school uniforms like us.

Clothing aside, it wasn't weird for us to see classmates and acquaintances, but before we reached one of the exits, a strange sight caught our attention.

"Isn't that Miyamoto-kun...?" said Kikyuu.

For Kikyuu, someone like Miyamoto wasn't worth mentioning. But because of the people he was with, his presence suddenly piqued our interest.

"He's with... Kondou-kun from Class D... and a bunch of second-

year students..." she continued.

"Oh... Is that strange?" I asked.

We weren't particularly close, and that distance only widened after his friend group declared that I was their enemy.

"Well, it is... But not really...? I'm not too sure," Kikyou answered. "Miyamoto-kun recently joined the baseball club, so it's normal for him to know some second-year students..."

She narrowed her eyes and took a closer look.

"That's Matsui-senpai from Class 2-B. He's from the baseball club... And that's Hachimura-senpai. He's also from Class 2-B, but he's part of the basketball club. I can't see the face of the other guys, but just from those two, I guess it makes sense that Miyamoto-kun and Kondou-kun are together."

"You really know everyone."

"Stop teasing me."

"I'm just telling the truth."

"You know it's not the truth. I don't know *everyone*."

"I guess you're right. But you know so many people that you give the vibe of someone who knows everyone."

"That's fair." Kikyou accepted my point, taking it as a compliment. "Anyway, I guess it's nice for Miyamoto-kun to expand his social circle further. Maybe he could be more useful to the class."

"That would be ideal."

"Ideal is the right word. I know he's making an effort to get noticed by his crush, but you never know. He might suddenly just quit if he confesses and gets rejected."

As Miyamoto's classmate, I can only agree with Kikyou. His mental fortitude is comparable with the likes of Yamauchi and Ike, after all.

The two of us continued walking back to the dorms as Miyamoto's group disappeared from our sight.

"Do you think he'll get rejected?" I asked.

"A hundred percent. I could only pray that he doesn't get laughed at," Kikyou sarcastically smirked.

That's harsh. The person you like laughs at you after your confession-- I think that's pretty traumatic.

"You seem to know who the girl is."

"Well, I'm not entirely sure, but I think it's a girl from Class 2-A. Her name is Asahina Nazuna-senpai."

"I see..."

Asahina Nazuna. I thought it was a name that I would forget soon after, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

SS.27 - Matsushita Chiaki: He's Ridiculous

This sucks... I really wanted to help out, but I went ahead and caught a cold. I hope my notes were enough to help them make questions about the last lessons.

As I thought about this, the doorbell in my room made a sound.

"Please come in," I replied.

I was already expecting a visitor, so I unlocked the door before laying on the bed. If it's an intruder intending to bring harm, then I can only blame myself for succumbing to laziness-- uncharacteristic of my usual paranoid self.

"I'm coming in." A girl's voice could be heard from the other end of the door.

"Thanks for this, Horikita-san."

She brought more medicine and some consumables.

"It's no problem. You could say that this is just an extension of my job as the class representative. That said, I'm sure you called me here for a specific reason."

I caught a cold and will be bedridden until I recover. To be honest, I was lucky. It was starting to get chilly, and the students who were sensitive to the changing season were unfortunate enough to contract influenza.

Anyway, I could've asked some of my friends to bring me what I needed, but I specifically told Chabashira-sensei to call Horikita-san after I reported my condition to her. I figured that I would use this opportunity to know what really happened during the Zodiac Exam.

"Ayanokouji-kun told me that if I wanted an explanation of what happened in the Zodiac Exam, then I should ask you. If now isn't a good time, then we can arrange a meeting for another day. I might infect you, after all."

Horikita-san was surprised. She probably didn't expect me to have such a request.

"I see... I think now is a good time, though. As long as I keep my distance, I'm sure I'll be fine."

I just took my medicine and I was wearing a mask. The danger isn't that high. If so, then I'll gladly take this opportunity.

"Alright. I'll leave it to you, Horikita-san."

"Ayanokouji-kun didn't give me any advance notice about being asked by you. Since that's the case, I'll tell you everything I know."

You're also an important asset to the class. I think having another capable person in the know will be helpful."

So her surprised reaction wasn't an act.

"That... is good to know... I didn't expect you to think so highly of me."

"I never thought of any of you in that regard at first, and I also didn't think that would change in the future... But Ayanokouji-kun made me realize how arrogant I was being."

That was natural. I was the same. Ever since I was put in Class D and realized what it meant, I thought I'd hide my abilities to fit in. I felt hopeless and thought I was surrounded by idiots. That perspective was instantly shattered at the very same moment it was formed-- all thanks to a person named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

He also managed to change her. If Ayanokouji-kun hadn't shown Horikita-san the ropes of being this class's leader, I wonder how slow and painful her development would be. Such a change... The class would've been largely affected by it, too.

"Horikita-san... Just what happened during the Zodiac Exam?" I coughed a little bit after asking that question.

Horikita-san took the glass of water on my bedside table and refilled it.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome," she replied as she took her seat. "There's a lot to explain, so I want you to tell me what you know first. That way, I'd know where to start."

"After Kouenji-kun submitted Minamikata-san's name, you negotiated with Class C to secure some private points. That's all I know about your involvement before the final discussion. As for Ayanokouji-kun, he told me to keep an eye on you."

"To keep an eye on *me*?"

"For some reason, he really believed that you'd figure out the pattern. To him, it wasn't a matter of *if*, but a matter of *when*. He asked me to message him once you've done it, and of course, I immediately did so as soon as you explained the pattern to us."

I was a member of the group chat of representatives. Ayanokouji-kun wasn't in it because Horikita-san was the representative of the Dragon Group.

"I see... So you were one of his accomplices."

"Yes. I knew about his plan with the Dog Group to achieve Outcome #1. According to him, he wanted me to keep track of your progress so he could communicate with the members of the Dog Group without any misunderstandings. Since Ayanokouji-kun wanted to keep that plan a secret, he needed me to be his accomplice."

Ayanokouji-kun told me that Yokoyama-san, the chosen representative of the Dog Group, didn't have the capacity to effectively monitor Horikita-san, so he chose me. I was honestly flattered since it came from him.

"Who are the others apart from you and the members of the Dog Group?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do any of the Dog Group members know more than you?"

"I don't think so..." I shook my head.

"Then there must be another one..." Horikita-san said, looking like she was in deep thought.

What does she mean by that...?

"You see, Horikita-san... I asked Ayanokouji-kun about his motives. He told me that he wanted to score a deal with Ryuuen-kun... But that just raised more questions. Why would he keep it a secret from you? Why did Ryuuen-kun accept the deal? And why would he want to make that deal in the first place?"

According to Kushida-san and Hirata-kun, the Dragon Group members were initially under the impression that Ryuuen-kun knew about the pattern. But after our class's victory, that doesn't seem to be the truth. He was bluffing.

"I also... kind of accused Ayanokouji-kun of being a traitor."

"A traitor...?" Horikita-san tilted her head in confusion.

"Yes. I suspected him of leaking Minami-kun's identity as the VIP to Ryuuen-kun. I wonder if I misunderstood."

"Well, did he deny it?"

"He didn't, but it's not like he confirmed it either."

"I see. I understand your position now, Matsushita-san." Horikita-san repeatedly nodded.

I stayed silent. As someone with a curious mind, I can't help but want these questions answered.

"Firstly, Ayanokouji-kun kept it a secret from me because his true plan was kind of against mine."

Kind of against...?

"My plan was to figure out the pattern and win the exam via blowout. There might've been some room for negotiation with Ichinose-san's class, but I would've wanted every other non-allied group to reach Outcome #3. We could've obtained more rewards and the gap between our class and Sakayanagi-san's class would've been even wider."

"And Ayanokouji-kun was against that?"

"Yes. He wanted to make sure that we could gain enough points to become Class A but not so much that we'd feel secure."

"But what does manipulating the Dog Group's result achieve other

than mitigating 50 class points away from our class."

"That's not it at all, Matsushita-san. Ayanokouji-kun's plan with the Dog Group-- it's not what you think it is."

At that moment, I only felt one thing-- goosebumps.

"The Dog Group, Minami-kun's identity getting leaked, me figuring out the pattern, Ryuuen-kun bluffing about his knowledge, our negotiation with Ichinose-san... Everything that happened during the Zodiac Exam... was meticulously engineered according to Ayanokouji-kun's wishes."

A part of me expected that answer, but another part of me also couldn't believe it.

"Everything started because of Kouenji-kun. His reckless actions made the previous stalemate shatter to pieces. Ayanokouji-kun managed to get Minamikata-san's name from him right after."

Since Kouenji-kun's target happened to be a Class C student, our alliance with them would've been shaken. I'm sure Ryuuen-kun will take advantage of that in some way.

"Ayanokouji-kun gave the name to you, right? That's why you had the advantage of having four names for at least a day before you gave away Karuizawa-san's name to Class C."

As far as I know, that's what happened next.

"You're right, Matsushita-san... but at that point, nothing hardly even mattered anymore..." Horikita-san said with a defeated voice.

"Eh...?"

"Right after getting Minamikata-san's name, Ayanokouji-kun... figured out the pattern."

Hearing that, I sighed exasperatedly.

"At that point, he'd already won. Ayanokouji-kun could do whatever he wanted, and that's exactly what he did. He wrote a script for every single one of us to follow," Horikita-san slowly shook her head. "He secretly met up with Ryuuen-kun and he offered him a lifeline. Class D's points were far below ours, so he was the perfect accomplice for his plan. He used Ryuuen-kun both as a distraction against Ichinose-san and Katsuragi-kun, and a driving force for me to find the pattern on my own."

"So the Dog Group..."

"You can call it a payment or a reward among the other benefits of being his main accomplice. The Dragon Group achieving Outcome #1 was probably a way for Ayanokouji-kun to earn some private points for himself and Ryuuen-kun wanted the Dog Group to achieve Outcome #1 in exchange."

"If I remember correctly, four members of the Dog Group were Class D students, including the VIP. So I guess it makes a lot of sense for Ryuuen-kun to choose that group in particular."

Horikita-san nodded.

"Ayanokouji-kun most likely leaked Minami-kun's name to balance our gains and losses. And he made Ryuuen-kun act like the one who knew everything so Ichinose-san and I wouldn't expect that Ayanokouji-kun himself would betray us. This stunt also made Katsuragi-kun side with Ryuuen-kun."

"This is ridiculous! Ichinose-san's class broke even in class points because they weren't necessarily our enemies. Ryuuen-kun's class also broke even but had the second-most gain in private points because he was Ayanokouji-kun's accomplice. Meanwhile, Katsuragi-kun's class lost 100 class points while our class gained 100 class points, which was the bare minimum amount to elevate our class to Class A..."

"It is ridiculous. All of us were just dancing on top of his palm. The only reason why I managed to figure out the pattern was because of Ayanokouji-kun, too. He sprinkled hints every time we talked, and I barely managed to put everything together."

I can't even react anymore. Everything felt so surreal. That said, it lines up perfectly with the Ayanokouji Kiyotaka that we all knew. After a few seconds, I managed to regain my cool.

"And to think that his main goal was to get rid of his status as the class leader..." I could only laugh weakly.

I think I understood him more than most people. If I was in his position, I might've chosen the same path. Ayanokouji-kun must've felt bored and fed up. With a mind like his, beating anyone in this school was an easy feat. But he didn't want to stand out, so with the knowledge that he was strongest, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka simply stopped trying to fight. He didn't like dealing with troublesome things if he could help it.

"He did keep his promise and took us to Class A, so I can't really say anything about this," Horikita-san shrugged.

I looked toward my window which was filled with condensed water vapor from the cold outside. He's ridiculous. I have no doubt in my mind... that as long as the person named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka wanted to fight, our class was the strongest.

Manipulation, deception, control... None of that would work against someone like him. That's why I'm still thankful. When he stepped down, he may have stopped being our ally, but at least he wasn't our enemy.

Author's Notes:

If the loss-gain exchange with Katsuragi's class was only 50 class points, it wouldn't have been enough for a promotion.

Former Class A - $1218 - 50 = 1168$

Former Class B - $1112 + 50 = 1162$

One might argue that Kiyotaka could either:

*- Make Katsuragi's class **lose 100** class points while only **gaining 50** class points for his class.*

or

*- Make Katsuragi's class only **lose 50** class points while **gaining 100** class points for his class.*

... to optimize the gap to be as close as possible, but it wasn't really necessary. It would also cause some of the narratives he created with Ryuen to weaken.

Vol. 6: Chapter 7.1 - Mock Test

The next Wednesday, our class had its fifth and final mandatory study session. With a little over two weeks left before the final exam, we were encouraged to prepare however we want.

According to Keisei, it seems like Airi, Ken, and everyone else were ready. They just need to keep reviewing his materials for retention.

On that very next day, Horikita also made a very important announcement.

"In light of everyone's preparation, I would like to propose a mock test for our class."

An uproar followed suit. Each tutor had their own way of teaching their students, but making them answer test questions was always part of the agenda. This time, however, our class will emulate the exam itself and take a mock test.

"Does anyone have any disagreements?" asked Horikita.

Everyone shook their heads. They were surprised, but they wouldn't go against a relatively straightforward plan.

"Great. You have a week to prepare. We will have the mock test on Tuesday after next week."

Hirata raised his hand.

"Yes, Hirata-kun?"

"Who will be making the questions for the mock test?" he asked.

"We have the questions prepared," she replied before looking at me. "Isn't that right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Yeah. We managed to finish all four hundred questions," I nodded.

The class started to murmur once more.

"We're going to use our own test questions...?"

"That's a bit..."

"Yeah..."

Horikita carefully checked each and every one of our classmates' reactions.

"It seems like you have some reservations about this," she said.

Hondou was the first one to raise a hand in response.

"Uhh, Horikita-san. I think most of our classmates are worried about the test questions getting leaked," he said.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"It was pretty obvious that there's someone in here who ratted us out to Class B during the sports festival. It would've been impossible to rig our match-ups otherwise," followed Minami (Setsuya).

Unrest could be felt within the class. Hirata and the other tutors started to look worried. It was finally time to open this can of worms for everyone. They stayed silent, waiting for Horikita to address the situation as she promised.

"You're right. There was a traitor inside the class. They leaked our participation table to Class B."

The class's soft murmurs turned to a clamor. Their biggest fear had been confirmed.

"Seriously?!"

"Who the hell would betray us?!"

"They're the worst!"

Some were quick to voice out their emotions, but most of us stayed passive.

"You don't seem fazed by this, Horikita-san. Is there something that you wanna tell us?" Maezono narrowed her eyes.

"There's nothing to worry about. The traitor themselves admitted to their behavior. I knew why they chose to betray the class."

Everyone was on the edge of their seats. The noise was constant, but the tension was escalating. The class needed answers.

"For obvious reasons, I would like to keep the traitor's identity--"

"It was me."

Horikita's explanation was immediately interrupted. A single male voice made the noisy classroom turn dead silent.

"Kikuchi-kun..."

Even Horikita was caught off-guard. She never expected Kikuchi to reveal his identity to everyone. He stood up and walked to Horikita's side.

"I was the one who leaked the participation table to Class B."

"Kikuchi...?"

"No way... Tsuki...?"

"You're the traitor...?"

"Out of all people..."

Everyone felt conflicted, especially Kikuchi's friends. They couldn't believe what they were hearing right now.

"As the class leader, Horikita-san should be the one who'd try to persecute you the most. But earlier, it was almost like she didn't mind what you did. Even now, that still seems to be the case," Maezono stood up and asked. "Why did you do it...? There must've been a good reason..."

"There is a good reason, and I'm sure Horikita-san would've gotten to the bottom of it. But I think it's better for me to personally step

forward and tell you everything. You all know me. I wouldn't betray the class for something trivial like private points."

"Tsuki! Please, let me explain with you!"

Mori stood up. Her legs and arms were slightly trembling, but she briskly walked to the front and talked with Kikuchi. Everyone was confused, and more questions popped up. Now, even Mori was involved.

"Nene, you..." Kikuchi was surprised to see Mori's brazen decision, but he accepted her help with a smile. "Alright."

The whole class listened. The two of them narrated how everything started when Sakayanagi tried to frame Mori for something that she didn't do. She asked Kikuchi for help and Sakayanagi used him to get her hands on Class A's participation table. After knowing the details, everyone understood how the two of them were backed into a corner.

"They were prepared and we were caught in their trap. If I didn't comply with Class B's demands, Nene would've been punished for violence. She could've been suspended or even expelled. Even if I wasn't someone who cared about her well-being and only thought about the class, the consequences weren't something that we could handle."

The class had no words. We may have lost the sports festival, but the gap between us and Class B only closed by 50 class points. Compared to the consequences we would face if Mori was expelled, it suddenly seemed insignificant.

"What the hell?! We should tell the school about this!" said the enraged Ike.

"Don't do anything reckless, Ike. I understand how you feel, but we have zero incriminating evidence to prove our side of the story, regardless of whether we're innocent or not. And even if we deleted the video from their phones, there's no guarantee that they didn't back it up somewhere," glared Kikuchi.

He felt very frustrated. He had no choice but to take Sakayanagi's word for it.

"If you think about it, Sakayanagi-san was just playing with us. There was no reason for her to let us go. She could've used the video to threaten us over and over again, but she didn't." Mori gazed down, looking shaken.

"Maybe she's got more blackmailing material...?" Yamauchi asked nervously.

"No, that's impossible. That was the only thing she got of me," Mori firmly shook her head in denial.

"The reason why we're turning ourselves in is to warn you guys. I never intended to betray the class-- never have and never will. In

fact, I thought leaking the participation table was the best solution to the problem. Class B might've left us alone now, but what about the rest of you? Class D did something similar to get Ike and Yamauchi in trouble, so if you're not careful, you might become their next target."

Whispers ensued. Most of our classmates were visibly frightened by that possibility. They vividly remember how much of a mess Ike and Yamauchi's case was. And now, Mori and Kikuchi were the new victims.

"Your fears are understandable, but we'll do our best to help prevent these things from happening in the future. Sakura-san managed to stop Class D from targeting Sudou-kun. We were also able to negotiate with Ryuen-kun so the charges against Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun could be dropped. And now, Kikuchi-kun's caution minimized our loss from Class B's blackmailing. None of our enemies' attempts have dealt irreparable damage, but that might change in the future. So, I want everyone to properly communicate with each other. If you notice strange things happening around you, don't hesitate to contact me or Hirata-kun."

Horikita's long speech managed to calm everyone's nerves, but the problem still remains.

"But wouldn't it still be reckless? Even if it's just a small chance, Class B might get some info on our questions. Kiyotaka and others' hard work will be all for naught." Akito spoke up.

"You're right, Miyake-kun. But you don't have to worry. It's a risk that we're willing to take. And since the issue with the traitor has been resolved, leaks will be even more unlikely. As a co-leader, wouldn't you agree, Hirata-kun?"

Seeing Hirata's somewhat bitter smile, it didn't seem like they rehearsed this.

"I trust your decision, Horikita-san. I do think that using our own test questions, while risky, is going to yield the best results to see how far everyone has gotten. I would not doubt the quality of Ayanokouji-kun, Kushida-san, and Matsushita-san's work."

Horikita nodded along as he talked.

"Horikita-san had already told us about the mock test before. I don't think everyone needs to worry. I trust Horikita-san's decision," said Kikyō.

The class wasn't completely convinced, but if both Kikyō and Hirata were advocating for Horikita, then who were they to doubt her?

And besides, even if Class B gets a hold of our questions, at most, it's just a clue on what lessons we were focusing on. At the end of the day, our questions were made for Ichinose's Class C to answer,

and I doubt she'd want to take advantage of those leaks.

After classes ended, Ken and I were called in by Horikita.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"No," I shook my head.

"Hmm... It's rare for you to be in the dark."

"You'll have to get used to it. I'm just a regular member of the class now."

"Haha, I guess so. I'm not as smart as you, so I'd feel even more fed up if I was something like a class leader."

"You were great at it during the sports festival, though."

"That was one exception! If you guys need someone to lean on during the sports events, then I'll be here!" Ken smirkingly tapped on his chest.

After getting back to the classroom, we saw three people waiting inside. Horikita was there, as well as Hirata.

"Oh, Sudou, Ayanokouji, you're here!"

"Hah? Hondou? Whatchu doin' here?"

The third person was Hondou. He met us with an energetic wave and a huge smile on his face. Considering how everything had gone so far, I guess this wasn't something that I should be surprised about. His influence, not just within the class, but within the entire year, was growing, slowly but surely. It was only a matter of time before he becomes a main player in this game.

Vol. 6: Chapter 7.2 - Business

"Oi, Horikita. What's Hondou doing here?" asked Ken.

"Hmm... I think it's better if Hondou-kun explains."

"Huh? Did Hondou do something?"

"Well, you see, Hondou-kun has been actually working with us for a couple of weeks now." Hirata fixed some papers as he answered.

"While I was the one who proposed the idea of a mock test, the reason for it was because of the information Hondou-kun had," said Horikita.

"Yeah. To put it bluntly, we're under attack. *Again*."

"Again...?!" Ken rolled his eyes in exasperation.

He was getting fed up, wondering just how vulnerable our classmates were, including him.

I turned my eyes to Horikita to get her attention. She returned my look, knowing what my intentions were.

"Well, before you start your explanation, Ayanokouji-kun and Sudou-kun need to know why they're here," she explained. "Sudou-kun's involvement with the basketball club may play a role in this case, so I called you here to ask some questions. And for, Ayanokouji-kun, I just want a little bit of your input. Is that okay with the two of you?"

"I mean, sure, I don't mind." Ken shrugged.

"Yeah, me too," I followed.

If it's a simple role, then I don't really have any reason to refuse.

"Sorry, I'm late!"

The door opened as the last member of this meeting finally arrived.

"Oh, Kikyou-chan, hey there!" waved Hondou.

"Good afternoon, Kushida-san," greeted Hirata.

"Thank you for coming, Kushida-san. Since the test questions have been finished, Hirata-kun and I might need your assistance in this case."

We told her the initial part of the conversation and Kikyou perfectly gave the reaction of a concerned classmate. It was easy to guess why her involvement was needed. The amount of information she has due to her connections should be beneficial for Horikita.

"Well, first of all, who's the target?" I asked.

"It's Soshi."

"Miyamoto-kun?" said the surprised Kikyou.

Miyamoto, huh? I see. So that's how he's going to do this.

"What's Ryuen's card against him," asked Ken.

"His reputation," replied Hondou. "Soshi has a crush on this senior, right? I think she's a second-year. We asked him to take a picture of her to know what she looks like. He did take one, but that idiot didn't delete it. I think you can guess what happens next."

(1)

"It's Asahina-senpai, right?"

"Ohh! So you know about her, Kikyou-chan."

"I just heard it from someone by chance, so I wasn't really sure."

"So that bastard, Ryuen, used the picture to blackmail Miyamoto?"

"Yeah, that's basically what happened."

"Can you explain a bit more about how it got to that point?" I asked.

"Ohh, well, originally, Ryuen only knew that Soshi has a crush on a second-year girl. He used Kondou from the basketball club to confront him. That guy posed as someone who liked one of Asahina-senpai's friends and tried to get close to Soshi."

Kikyou and I looked at each other, recalling what we saw five days ago.

"At first, he was just poking fun at him, but it eventually lead to him knowing about the picture. Of course, Ryuen spared no time getting it. He took Soshi by surprise and got a copy of the picture," Hondou shook his head in dismay. "You remember that forum on ANHS's official website, right? Ryuen threatened to post everything there, including Soshi's name and class, if he doesn't give him what he wants."

"And as you would expect, Ryuen-kun wants our test questions." Horikita crossed her arms.

"But why...? Class B will make questions for us and Class C will receive our questions. What does Class D have to do with it?" asked Kikyou.

Knowing Ryuen, I think the answer was fairly obvious.

"Business..." I held my chin and answered.

"That's probably it," said Horikita. "Thanks to our efforts since the first semester, our class average has increased significantly. Meanwhile, Class D stayed stagnant. And now, they're at the bottom out of all four classes in terms of academic performance. In this exam, the rules are pretty straightforward. I don't think Class D has any chance of winning if they don't get a hold of Class C's questions. And unless Class B deliberately tries to lose, they would most likely get a higher score than Class D."

If Class B tries to throw away the exam for Class D, that'll be a win for us, too.

"In other words, unorthodox tactics won't work in this exam unless it involved sabotage from a class traitor," added Hirata.

"Aghh, this is pathetic! Can't Ryuuen's shit class do anything without relying on traitors? And why the hell is our class filled with easy targets for them to exploit?"

Before the second semester, Sakayanagi's class was divided in two which also gave birth to traitors. But after he dissolved Katsuragi's faction, it seems like they've united. Ryuuen also managed to create a rift in Ichinose's class during the first semester, but they patched it up in no time, making their class unity as strong as ever.

Our class didn't have any factions nor did it break it apart at any point. Even if our unity and coordination weren't as air-tight as Ichinose's class, we still had great teamwork. But time and time again, our rival classes would find weaknesses to exploit. Why... and how? It's a tough question at first, but the answer was relatively easy.

Our class is composed of many weak individuals.

"As Ayanokouji and Horikita-san had deduced, Class D's goal was business. According to Soshi, Ryuuen wants to sell our test questions to both Class C and Class B. Class C will have an advantage for obvious reasons. And for Class B, it seems like Sakayanagi-san wants to use those questions as the basis for what *not* to put in the ones they were making for us."

That makes sense. Whatever we put in our questions would most likely reflect what part of the lessons we were focusing on. If they avoid each and every single one of them, our class will have a much harder time answering their questions.

"Ryoutarou-kun, how is Miyamoto-kun doing right now?" asked Kikyuu.

"To be honest, Soshi was miserable. He was ready for the inevitable ruin of his reputation. After all, you and the others, especially Horikita-san, put those test questions under tight security. But because of this mock test, it seems like he's found a lifeline."

"W-Wait a dang minute. Horikita... Don't tell me you made this mock test to save Miyamoto?!"

"Close, but not quite, Sudou-kun. I have no intention of sabotaging the class. And besides, even if that happens, we'd only need to worry about Class B. I've already talked to Ichinose-san and told her that if Ryuuen tries to sell any leaked test questions from our class, they would be fake."

And even then, Ichinose probably wanted her class to take on our

challenge fairly.

Ken was confused, but it was understandable since he was the only one out of the loop about the mock test's real nature. I tapped him on the shoulder and explained.

"You see, Ken, we actually made two separate sets of test questions-- one for the mock test, and one to be submitted for the Paper Shuffle. If Miyamoto delivers the questions we'll answer for the mock test, then Ryuuen would be walking right into our trap. We didn't know about Miyamoto and Hondou's involvement in all of this before today, but Horikita already explained everything about the mock test to us, the question makers, beforehand."

"Ohh, I see. I understand," Ken nodded before turning back to Horikita. "And I'm here because you wanted to ask about Kondou, right? Well, he's a freshman member of the basketball club like me along with his classmate, Komiya. We're not that close considering how often they try to pick on me, but when we're on the court, both of them are just normal dudes who wanna play."

"I see... I didn't actually expect such high praise from you."

"I'm not praising them! Even if Ryuuen doesn't order them, they still tend to act snooty around me because they're jealous of my achievements. Not as much as before-- but they still do it sometimes!"

It's okay, Ken. We'll start to think that you're actually friendly with them if you keep ranting so passionately.

"Hmm... What are your thoughts, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Horikita.

"I mean, before you ask for my opinion, address the biggest problem first."

"Right... The ideal situation would be for Miyamoto-kun to give out the questions from our mock test. Class C would refuse to buy them and Class B would make a borderline-useless purchase. There would be no way for Ryuuen-kun to judge whether his plan with Miyamoto-kun succeeded or not after we take the final exam, so we don't have to worry about him getting *punished*... But the main problem remains. What if Ryuuen-kun doesn't let Miyamoto-kun go after all this?"

"That's especially true if the results won't be to his liking. We managed to turn the tables on him before and Sakayanagi-san seemingly let us go. But what about this time? What if he doesn't keep his promise and destroys Miyamoto-kun's reputation anyway?" added the worried Hirata.

According to Hondou, Miyamoto would be branded as a perverted voyeur who secretly takes pictures of girls. I can't imagine the rest of his high school life if that ever happens. If I remember

correctly, Miyamoto had been building connections with the seniors for a while now. If his reputation plummets because of this, not only would his hard work be destroyed, but those seniors would also become his enemies.

"Right now, we haven't really decided on anything. I have some ideas, but they have their own setbacks. We can try to make contact with Ryuuen-kun and say we're willing to give up our test questions in exchange for an agreement contract for him to delete the image and leave Miyamoto-kun alone after the Paper Shuffle. But that has its own risks. First of all, we'd be exposing our knowledge of the blackmail which might set him off. And even then, he might figure out that we're trying to scam him with decoy questions along the way."

Ken, Hirata, and Kikyou went into deep thought. Ryuuen might not be as whimsical as Sakayanagi who let Kikuchi and Mori get off unscathed, so Miyamoto was in a much more dangerous situation.

"Hmm... I also have an idea," said Hondou. "If they're using blackmail on us, then we could probably offset that by blackmailing them in return, right? That way, we'd be on equal grounds with the negotiation."

It's a standard tactic, and we've used it before. But there's an obvious problem with that idea.

"Unfortunately, we don't have anything to blackmail them with..." Hondou held his chin as he continued thinking.

Kikyou secretly clenched her fist. If we didn't sacrifice our forced cooperation contract with Ryuuen to make him delete his recording of Kikyou's conversation with me, then we might've had a card to play in this. Sadly, what's done is done.

"Ah! Maybe we can make one!" Hondou's expression lit up brightly.

Horikita finally realized what he wanted to say, but it was all too late.

"Wait, Hondo-ku--"

"Why don't we use those bugs that you had, Ayanokouji? You managed to save Haruki and Kanji with those handy things back then, right? Maybe we could secretly record Ryuuen's evil schemes if we bug Soshi's clothes!"

Hirata and Ken earnestly listened to Hondou's proposal, but Horikita clearly looked shaken. She subtly glanced at me and Kikyou, trying to observe our reactions.

Meanwhile, Kikyou had a blank smile as she listened to Hondou's words. I could almost hear the gears inside her head twisting and turning. It wouldn't take long until she pieces everything together. After a brief second of silence, Kikyou grinned from ear to ear.

"That's a great idea, Ryoutarou-kun!"

Author's Notes:

1. Pre-OAA era be like.

Vol. 6: Chapter 7.3 - Protagonist

"I still have them in my room. We can try, but Ryuuen will probably be on guard this time..." I replied.

"Yeah, that's true... Man, this is hard. How in the world do we get Soshi out of this...?"

"Arghh-! I'll just take Ryuuen's phone and delete those pictures myself!"

"Ohh! Now that's a plan Sudou would think of!"

"Don't hype him up..." I tsukkomi'd.

"Is this really the time to be joking around...?" Horikita sighed.

"I ain't jokin' around! If it weren't for the rules..."

"Let's calm down now. I still think there's a way to turn things around without using force."

"By force... I guess it would be easy for someone as strong as Sudou-kun," smiled Kikyou.

"You bet it is!"

"Ah, but Yamada-kun is always around Ryuuen-kun, right? Are you stronger than him?"

Faced with an innocent question, Ken could only answer truthfully-- or at least, he tried.

"W-Well... Maybe it's not *that* easy anymore..."

"Ahaha, I really wish it was," Hondou laughed bitterly before standing up. "I think we can end things here, for now, Horikita-san. We've practically covered everything already. The only thing we need to think about is how to save Soshi."

"I understand. We're going to continue working with Kushida-san in this case, if that's alright."

"Of course," Kikyou nodded without hesitation.

"Thank you for your time, Sudou-kun. If it's alright with you, we'd like some updates if anything strange happens with Kondou-kun or even Komiya-kun for that matter," asked Hirata.

"Sure," replied Ken.

"You too, Ayanokouji-kun. Please don't hesitate to give us your opinion on this matter if you have any."

"Of course," I nodded in return.

In other words, I don't have to do it if I don't want to. That saves me a lot of trouble.

With the initial plan in motion, we got out of the classroom and

split into two groups. Hirata and Horikita asked Kikyou to accompany them. Meanwhile, Ken and I left the building with Hondou. Ken, who was surprised by Hondou's involvement, decided to break the ice.

"You've really changed, Hondou. My opinion of you is gettin' better," he said.

"What's with that, Sudou? You're gonna make me blush," Hondou teased back.

"Shut it!" Ken bit back before turning serious. "Well, I'm just sayin' the truth."

Seeing this, Hondou reciprocated him.

"Everyone's changing, you know?" he simply said. "And I'm not like you, Sudou. All I'm doing is tryna be more *out there*. I'm not as fast as you in terms of improving my studies or anything like that. And I'm still as unathletic as ever."

Hearing his points, Ken could only agree.

"What made you want to change, though? You were just like Ike and Yamauchi durin' the first semester."

"Don't lump me with those morons-- is what I would like to say, but you're right. To be honest, I was already satisfied with how I was back then. Trying hard is a pain, after all."

Now that's something I can personally relate to.

"Well, we're the same. But after makin' some friends, I realized that I don't wanna get expelled... Suddenly, studyin' didn't seem so hard anymore."

"Heh, we're different in that case!" Hondou smirked. "Well... The main reason why I wanted to change is the guy behind us, staring like a creep."

He pointed at me with his thumb before giving me a side-eye.

"Kiyotaka?"

"Now that's surprising..." I commented.

"It's not surprising at all if you think about it. I'm not proud of it, but I thought I'd just try to stay as uninvolved as possible and worm my way to Class A while getting carried by the great Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. But I immediately realized how unfun that was, not to mention pathetic."

"It is pathetic..." said Ken.

"Hahaha, right? At first, I thought you had the same fate as us, Sudou. You were rash, easy to provoke, and you suck at studying. Everyone in the class was scared of you the moment you entered the classroom. But look at you now. Some girls in Class C and Class D are even starting to think you're cool."

"R-Really?!"

"Yeah, especially after the sports festival."

"I see..." Ken slightly blushed as he processed Hondou's words.

"Well, you can see where I'm going with this, right? If Sudou can do it, then maybe I can, too. I wanna make more friends, and I wanna try to be popular even with my low specs. If that happens, I can build connections. And in turn, people can rely on me in some way, shape, or form!"

"Woah... I didn't know you thought that far..."

"Heh, of course, you wouldn't. Only Soshi knows about it," he shrugged.

"I honestly think that's admirable, Hondou."

"Haha, it's fine to laugh, you know? Considering my looks and overall abilities, I'm sure you think I'm being overly ambitious."

"I mean, I get where you're comin' from. I've heard rumors about people badmouthin' me before. They say shit like *"he should know his place"* or *"he's getting carried away"* because they think I don't belong in a certain group," Ken laughed bitterly. "Probably thanks to my image as a violent delinquent."

"The elitist mindsets, right? I've heard that there are a number of entitled students in Class B who think that way. That's why I'm having a bit of trouble trying to associate myself with them... They look down on average Joe's like me while gushing on people like Tsukasaki or Satonaka or even non-Class B achievers like Hirata or Ayanokouji. Same happens to our female counterparts. I'd argue that they're even more brutal."

Condescending. Horikita was once like that, and Keisei also looked down on Ken, even if it was unconsciously. It's basic human nature to hold people who you think are below you in contempt because of ego. But by modern moral standards, it's a big problem. The fact that these people can unironically act supercilious probably meant that they were most likely unaware of their own shortcomings.

Boastful, snobby, scornful-- they were all in one package for someone who looks down on others. Even Kikyuu wasn't an exception. Of course, she could skillfully hide those qualities behind her mask. In fact, most people do, to some degree. But we're not talking about them. We're talking about those who openly show their disdain for others-- those who lack self-awareness and, in most cases, those who lack the ability to back their arrogance.

"Ah, I didn't say that to throw shade at you, Ayanokouji. I'm sure that I'd think the same if I was in their position. But since I'm on the receiving end of the contempt, it kinda sucks."

"Don't worry. I wasn't really thinking about it. And it's not like I don't agree with you."

Hondou's words made me think about my experiences as a

modern reader. With the proliferation of light novels and manga, not just in Japan, but in the entire world, I can't help but recall the amount of condescension I've read from comment sections and forums online.

There are a lot of nuances between each of them depending on the kind of story or scenario that they're commenting on, but Hondou's point made me remember a specific type of group.

I call this group the "Cosmetic Self-Inserters". I usually see them in stories where the protagonist is a cool yet relatable person. I say '*usually*'-- because even if the protagonist is an overpowered, larger-than-life, all-knowing, overachieving harem king, these people can still find a way to make it seem like they can relate (mostly to the protagonist's intelligence).

But I digress.

As I was saying, any character who can be somewhat against said protagonists will receive harsh comments from these Cosmetic Self-Inserters. And I'm not using the word '*against*' to say that these "arguably antagonistic" characters want to fight the protagonist directly. They can either be main antagonists, temporary villains, side characters, or even allies. The point is-- they may be against the image and values that the Cosmic Self-Inserters had for the protagonist as a proxy for themselves (regardless if it was different from what the author actually had in mind). And in turn, the Cosmetic Self-Inserters feel like these characters are also against them, *personally*.

Translating that in real life... If we consider the popular Tsukasaki Taiga as the protagonist, then the entitled Class B students would be our readers-- the Cosmetic Self-Inserters. In their minds, Hondou and Ken would be the insignificant side characters and the subject of their contempt. They would constantly compare Hondou and Ken to Tsukasaki, degrading the former two while lifting the latter on a pedestal. As a result, they would also feel good about themselves.

"Speaking of Soshi... He actually had the same thinking as mine. But I guess his motivations are more or less rooted in love."

"Is that crush of his even pretty?" asked the ignorant Ken.

"She is! Asahina-senpai is really popular in her year, and I heard she's close friends with the current student council president. To be honest, I wouldn't even be surprised if they were secretly dating."

"Damn... Miyamoto's got a hard battle on his way."

"I mean, he's my friend, so I'm rooting for him. But there's no way he can confess his feelings anytime soon. You remember what I said earlier, right? If people find out that an unpopular guy like Soshi confesses to a popular girl like Asahina-senpai, you can already imagine the looks he'd get."

"Yikes..."

From Hondou's perspective, Miyamoto was the protagonist of this event. That's why he'd root for an underdog like him. But for the people close to Asahina or Nagumo, I can already imagine the kind of words they would say.

"He wishes."

"He's getting full of himself."

"Tryhard."

"Clown."

I can see that Miyamoto was trying to raise his own status among the second-years, just like how Hondou was with the first-years. You're not just doing it for yourself. You're also doing it for your potential partner. Even if it was admirable for love to bloom between an unpopular guy and a very popular girl, the one who has the "lower status" would inevitably lose some confidence if they didn't work on themselves.

That's why...

"Hahaha, whether we like it or not, people will run their mouths however they want. So all I can really do is suck it up until I reach my goal..." Hondou clenched his fist as he looked forward. "But right now, I have to save Soshi from Ryuen. I'm not really a smart guy, so I can only ask Horikita-san and the others for help."

"I think you're plenty smart already," I said.

"You think so?"

I nodded without saying a word.

As we separated inside the dorm building, I felt like I'd gained a new level of understanding of certain things and certain people.

Vol. 6: Chapter 8.1 - Your Own Way

It was a sensitive time for us, Class A. With our loss during the sports festival, there's a high chance for Class B to overtake us in the Paper Shuffle. It was *my* job, as the class leader, to prevent that from happening.

The next day, I immediately made my move to confirm everything that Hondou-kun said. I wouldn't necessarily spill the beans to Miyamoto-kun, but I'll ask him a series of questions where I'd be able to discern some truths.

"He's finally here," I muttered, approaching Miyamoto-kun as soon as he entered the classroom. "Good morning, Miyamoto-kun. May I take some of your time?"

"Horikita-san...? I see. I know you wanna talk to me about what Ryoutarou told you yesterday, but I won't recommend it..." he replied in a whisper.

What...? That was a *completely* unexpected reply. Our plan was supposed to be a secret from him, so how did he know about yesterday?

Before I could ask him anything, Hondou-kun also arrived at the classroom and approached us with a casual greeting.

"Yo, Soshi. Oh, Horikita-san, too. What's up?"

His voice was loud enough for everyone to hear, but our classmates were busy talking among their friends. Only a handful of people shifted their attention to us.

Seeing both of our serious faces, Hondou-kun's expression stiffened as if he remembered something.

"O-Oh, right... You see, Horikita-san-" Hondou-kun nervously averted his eyes.

Miyamoto-kun interrupted him before he could finish.

"I haven't told Ryoutarou about this yet, so he didn't warn you, but you should avoid talking to me, even in the classroom."

"What...? What are you talking about?" Hondou-kun asked, looking confused.

"I'll tell you, so don't make a fuss right now," Miyamoto-kun said before turning to me. "I'll just message you, Horikita-san. Any more than this could be dangerous."

After thinking about it for a bit, I finally had an idea as to what Miyamoto-kun was trying to say. I nodded without saying a word

and left the two of them.

"Thanks for the heads-up, Horikita-san!" He smilingly waved at me as I walked away.

His parting words and actions solidified my theory.

It didn't take long before my phone buzzed.

(7:45) [Ryuuen threatened me that he can watch my every move. If that's true, then he might have another spy inside the class. Even messaging you inside the classroom is a risky move, so I'll keep things brief for now.]

Miyamoto-kun skillfully typed his long message under the guise of showing something funny to Hondou-kun.

(7:46) [If you're wondering how I knew everything, I interrogated Ryoutarou last night and made him spill the beans. That said, forgetting to tell him about a potential spy was my own mistake. We can talk about this more through him at a later date, so for now, all you need to know is that I'm not against your plan.]

(7:46) [You don't have to reply.]

I see. So that was the reason, after all... I've already accounted for the possibility of multiple traitors, but now that I'm faced with it...

The situation has become a lot more troublesome...

For now, Hondou-kun will stay as our middleman. It was right to keep his involvement with us a secret. If Ryuuen-kun notices that he's working with us, he'll most likely connect the dots and deduce that we know about Miyamoto-kun's situation.

It's good that we don't have to keep Miyamoto-kun in the dark anymore, but there's also an obvious downside to that. If he's in on the plan, then he'd have to act like he's not-- in front of Ryuuen-kun. And if he fails to deceive him... then everything might come crashing down.

(7:48) [Is Miyamoto-kun a good actor?]

I wrote a short message and sent it to Ayanokouji-kun. As someone who has worked with him in the past, I'm sure he'd have an idea.

(7:49) [They were reliable accomplices back when Ryuuen targeted Ike and Yamauchi.]

As expected, his answers were exactly what I was looking for. The plan could still work.

(7:49) [Are you planning to tell him?]

(7:49) [... or did he find out?]

I replied saying it was the latter.

Classes for the day had ended. I was asked to collect some notebooks for Chabashira-sensei, and after confirming the completion, I finally left the classroom as the last student inside to

submit them.

"Good work, Horikita."

"Well then," I bowed before exiting the faculty room.

I debated where I should go next, but before I could weigh the pros and cons of my options, a familiar voice called out to me from behind.

"Oh, if it isn't Horikita."

"Sudou-kun? What are you doing here?"

"I ran an errand for a senior of mine. I was just about to go back to the gym."

"I see. Good luck with your club activities."

"Nah, there's no rush." I thought Sudou-kun would walk past me, but he slowed down to match my pace. "And my timing's perfect. I have some news about Kondou."

Hearing that, the two of us went to a nearby bench outside of the building. I could see the track and field club members running around seriously despite the upcoming exams.

"How passionate," I muttered as I heard Sudou-kun's footsteps.

"Here."

Sudou-kun threw a can of black tea from a vending machine in my direction at a fairly high speed. His lack of hesitation meant that he was expecting me to catch it with ease. Of course, I did just that.

"You're quite reckless," I commented.

"What are you sayin'? I knew you had that."

"Well, I guess I'm one of the more athletic girls in our class."

"That's part of it, but I ain't gonna do the same to Kushida or Maezono. And I'd still hesitate even if it was someone like Onodera."

Onodera-san was arguably the most athletic girl in Class A, so Sudou-kun's statement piqued my interest.

"Then why? You can't be saying that you don't see me as a girl, right?"

"Hell no. I just remembered what Kiyotaka told me a while ago. He said that, on a good day, you could probably knock me down in a fight if I was careless. If that was true, then your reflexes and dexterity should be pretty good."

"Ayanokouji-kun... said that?"

"It's just a hunch, though. If I hit your face, then I would've apologized."

"An apology wouldn't be enough."

"I-I guess. Fine, I'll let you hit my face with a can in return."

I sighed, thinking that it was pointless to continue a conversation about something that wouldn't happen.

"So? What's going on with Kondou-kun from Class D?"

"It's nothin' much, really. I just saw him talkin' with Miyamoto earlier. And from what I've seen, they seem to be on friendly terms."

"Miyamoto-kun already knows about the plan... He's probably just pretending to be cordial with him."

"Eh...? He knows? How?"

"Through Hondou-kun. His increased busyness must've been suspicious to him."

"That makes sense. Those two are always together as far as I'm concerned..." Sudou-kun gulped his soda in one go and skillfully shot the dented tin can to a nearby bin.

"He'll be joinin' the meetings now, right?"

My eyebrows instinctively furrowed at Sudou-kun's words.

"He can't... According to Miyamoto-kun, there might be another spy inside the class, so he can't carelessly make contact with us."

"Say what?!"

"Please lower your voice. You're hurting my ears."

Even the people at the field who are roughly a hundred and fifty meters away from us seemed to have heard him.

"S-Sorry... But what are you guys gonna do?"

"You don't have to panic too much. I'm taking that possibility into account for all of our next moves, but the existence of a second traitor is not yet confirmed. There's still a chance that it's just a bluff to intimidate Miyamoto-kun even more."

"I see... I guess so..." Sudou-kun's composure started to recover. "Spies aside, Miyamoto will keep actin' like a traitor 'til the end of the exam, right? But isn't he screwed if Ryuen finds out?"

Exactly. *He's* screwed, not us. The class will be fine even if Ryuen-kun finds out about the decoy questions. That's why Miyamoto-kun must make sure that he succeeds. His reputation will ultimately depend on whether *he* can fool Ryuen-kun.

"That was my main concern, but there's a silver lining in Miyamoto-kun being the target. He might just pull it off. Ayanokouji-kun vouched for his acting capabilities."

"Ohh, right. They *were* involved during the case with Ike and Yamauchi. I mean, if Kiyotaka says so, then I guess we can put some faith in Miyamoto."

"You really respect Ayanokouji-kun's opinion, huh?"

I panicked internally. I didn't notice that I thought out loud until it was too late.

"Well, yeah..."

Sudou-kun stretched his arms forward before leaning back on the bench.

"I respect Kiyotaka a *whole* lot, so I still tried my best to study even if I didn't want to at first."

He gave me a side-eye and continued.

"You know, I was treated like trash ever since I was a kid. That's why I craved attention-- I wanted to be noticed. And Kiyotaka was the first one who did."

"Didn't you become friends with Ike-kun's group first?"

"You're technically right, but I ain't friends with them now, am I?" he scoffed. "My initial time with those guys felt pretty shallow. I felt like I'd hate studying even more if I stayed friends with them."

Now that I think about it, he probably would...

"Because of Kiyotaka, I got my wish. I met my friends, and the class even recognized me... So more than anything, I didn't want to disappoint him."

I've never seen him look so calm and pensive. And for the first time in my life, I felt a genuine sense of camaraderie.

"We're the same. I didn't want him to be disappointed in me..." I replied.

Sudou-kun turned to me with a slightly surprised face.

"Haha, that's probably the extent of our similarities, though."

I stayed silent and pondered our conversation. The respect I have for Ayanokouji-kun resembles that of the respect I have for my brother. Knowing this, I feel like there's something I should realize...

As I went into deep thought, Sudou-kun stood up and started walking away.

"I need to get back now, but before I go, I wanna tell you something, Horikita."

"What is it...?"

"I know I'm not in a position to lecture someone who's a lot smarter than me, but I hope you don't force yourself too much by tryna copy Kiyotaka."

A wave of indescribable feelings suddenly whirled inside me.

"Copy...?"

"Ah, I didn't mean that in a bad way or anything, alright? I mean, you got your own ways, and he got his. You could probably copy some of his methods, but I feel like you'll get lost if you try to perfectly emulate his way of doing things... or something like that..." Sudou-kun started to panic, but he continued to explain. "A-Ah, like in basketball! Players copy each other's moves all the time, and some even have very similar play styles. But *Shaq's Monster Slam* or *Kareem's Skyhook* are named after them because only they can do it."

"I see..." I didn't really know much about the specific names he just mentioned but...

"Aghhhh, so annoying! What am I even talking about...?"

"It's alright, Sudou-kun. I think I understand what you're trying to tell me... And I want to say thank you."

He must've been paying attention to how I did things as Class A's leader. In truth, I didn't think I was actively trying to emulate Ayanokouji-kun, but I was admittedly growing complacent in confirming if that was still the case.

"Ohh... Sure... Well, then..."

As I watched his retreating back, I felt my resolve strengthen in a new way.

Vol. 6: Chapter 8.1.2 - Wavering Trust

It's been over a month since I felt suffocated by Ryuen-kun's harassment. The amount of discomfort I've felt from Class D students asking about me was unbearable at first, but I was getting used to it. In his mind, I was probably getting more and more unsettled, but as long as he doesn't get anything decisive, I shouldn't be in any real danger.

Horikita-san and Hirata-kun were constantly getting bothered by Ryuen-kun's classmates while Kiyotaka-kun and I were getting followed and watched. All four of us were getting similar treatments, so apart from them being a nuisance, no harm was being done.

"It's not like he's focusing on me."

That's what I tell myself to stay composed. I can't be overcome by emotion and mess things up. I'm still safe. None of our enemies know about my past... Horikita-san won't put me at risk as long as our goals align.

And Kiyotaka-kun is my ally...

He's my ally... right...?

But yesterday...

"Kiyotaka-kun... was lying to me...?"

I was too scared to ask him about it. He didn't say anything even though he should've known that I'd be able to understand everything...

There must be a reason!

Was he nervous that his secret got found out?

No, that's impossible! This is Kiyotaka-kun we're talking about!

And Horikita-san-- it was subtle, but I think she was shaken, too. Does that mean she knew about the bugs? Did Kiyotaka-kun tell her?

No... She *definitely* knows...

Horikita-san supported Kiyotaka-kun when he lied to me and Hirata-kun during the Zodiac Exam. She's an accomplice.

But what if I know that now?! I can't do anything! Is he my enemy, after all?! Was he secretly planning to betray me in the future?!

I'm so... confused.

I wanted to trust him-- only him! Ever since that night, I've never

told him a single lie that could potentially compromise our relationship... But *he* lied to me... Why...?

Please say something, Kiyotaka-kun...

I don't know... I don't know anymore...

Vol. 6: Chapter 8.2 - Hidden Connection

On a certain cold Saturday night, Ryuuken walked all the way out to a resting area near the dorms.

"Good evening to you, Ryuuken-kun."

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Ryuuken sized up the petite figure of Class B's Sakayanagi Arisu. She was elegantly seated on one of the benches, accompanied by Kamuro Masumi. Ryuuken felt another presence, but he couldn't pinpoint where to look.

"Would it hurt you to return a greeting?" Sakayanagi didn't look offended as she smiled in response. "Anyway, it's fancy seeing you out here. Did you have a great talk?"

It wasn't surprising for her to deduce his current business. They've worked with the same person once, after all.

"Kukuku. You *could* say that. I find these kinds of guys to be extremely amusing. They're not ignorant but also not as smart as they make themselves out to be." Ryuuken made himself comfortable on the other bench near Sakayanagi.

"Quite the pitiful existences then."

In truth, Sakayanagi wasn't remotely concerned about the people Ryuuken had just interacted with.

"What about you? Is playing with Suzune *that* interesting?" he asked.

"Oh my. You don't think so?" Sakayanagi tilted her head with a curious smile.

"Quit joking. She's fun to toy around with, but you can't be serious about fighting her when Ayanokouji is around."

After finding out that she's just Ayanokouji's pawn, Ryuuken's enthusiasm for crushing Horikita almost completely disappeared.

"I would be disappointed if you took me seriously," Sakayanagi chuckled. "At her level, I can't really consider Horikita-san to be my opponent."

"Heh, I guess taking back your throne is easy now that you control all of Class B."

"Fufufu... It was only a matter of time."

"Ohh, that's it... I can't wait for that grin of yours to turn upside down. After I'm finished with Ayanokouji, I might just go after you next."

Whether it was true or not, Sakayanagi didn't look afraid. Of course, Ryuuen already expected her reaction.

"Ayanokouji-kun doesn't seem that interested in fighting you, though."

"His feelings are irrelevant. I'll make him regret ever coming to this school."

Despite the darkness of the night, Sakayanagi could clearly distinguish the big, sinister smile that had formed on Ryuuen's face. Knowing how he operates, Sakayanagi easily understood the crux of his master plan.

"I see. So *that's* your intention. Certainly, I would be especially helpless if I fought on your stage."

Ryuuen smirked as if he heard something that didn't need to be said.

"Everyone who goes against me eventually stumbles into that pitfall. He can't stop the inevitable."

"So you're saying that the defeats you've suffered until now were necessary to entrap Ayanokouji-kun?"

Sakayanagi's questioning tone was designed to provoke him, but Ryuuen saw it as an opportunity. By making use of this opening, Ryuuen believed that he can uncover a hidden treasure among Sakayanagi's words.

"I'm not a sore loser, Sakayanagi. I never intended to get beaten in any of our battles, but Ayanokouji is on a different level from all the enemies I've faced 'til now. You gotta give credit where credit is due."

He won't take the bait. That's what he wants her to think.

"But things will be different this time around, huh? The climax of this plan will finally crown you as the victor. At least, that's what you believe."

"The stage has already been set up, and my pieces are in place. Once the time is right, *they* will be at my mercy." Ryuuen's words exuded an overwhelming amount of confidence. It was the air of someone who had made sure that everything was going according to their wishes.

"I'm impressed. It seems like your preparations have bore fruit."

Indeed it did. All it would take now was a final push to feign his defeat in order to win.

"Since he thinks like me, it's entirely possible for him to evade his downfall as long as he makes... a sacrifice," he explained. "I'd love to see him scamper around while looking for a way out. If Ayanokouji gives me a surprise, then that's even better! I want to see him give his all in trying to prevent the upcoming destruction."

Ryuuen's pupils shifted in Sakayanagi's direction. It was time to

harvest what he'd planted.

"His all, huh?"

Sakayanagi bashfully covered her lips with her hand.

"He's still holding back, you know?"

She knew her words were unnecessary, but her beaming veneer showed that she *just couldn't* help herself from uttering them.

Ryuuen's calculations paid off, and at last, he got a response that he never expected.

"Heh. How would *you* know?"

"I just do."

"Bullshit."

After considering the possibilities, it was easy for him to finally conclude that Sakayanagi knew who Ayanokouji really was.

"It's getting chilly, so I might have to call it a night. I'm looking forward to the climax of your battle, Ryuuen-kun."

Her shining lilac-colored hair reflected the moonlight as she stood from where she sat.

"Don't trip and fall, Sakayanagi."

"Thank you for your kind advice," she bowed before turning around.

Ryuuen knew that saying too little would yield him nothing, and saying too much would lose him something. So he said nothing while making it seem like he was saying everything.

He made Sakayanagi think that her attitude made him lower his guard when in reality, *he* was lowering *hers*. The result was evident. He got new information, and a clearer picture of Sakayanagi and Ayanokouji's relationship without giving her anything in return.

It was his win.

"Kukuku... How troublesome."

But despite it being a seemingly beneficial exchange, Ryuuen's gut feeling told him that Sakayanagi didn't lose as much as he wanted her to. In fact, he even felt like she didn't lose anything at all.

He stayed seated as the sound of Sakayanagi's cane slowly dissipated.

Walking on the paved pathway were two girls in two different moods.

"What were you guys even talking about?" asked the slightly peeved Kamuro.

"It's nothing important, Masumi-san. I was merely given the chance to brag a little bit."

Kamuro rolled her eyes, knowing that she won't get a proper answer.

Ryuuen had engineered their conversation to end up the way it did. But of course, Sakayanagi already knew all of this. She only played along with that little game because Ryuuen was essentially giving her the opportunity to show off her hidden connection with Ayanokouji to the very man trying to take him down. She wasn't afraid of what Ryuuen would find out right then and there because, at the end of the day, only she knows who Ayanokouji Kiyotaka truly is.

Vol. 6: Chapter 9.1 - Reliance

"There's been more of them than usual... but I guess I only have myself to blame..." I muttered before walking inside the classroom.

Everyone who wasn't busy greeted me with a smile. I did my best to reply, but as I've been doing the same thing for the past seven months or so, I can safely say that I'm pretty much used to it. I noticed a slight difference in Hirata's usual demeanor as I walked along the vacant aisles.

Class started and ended as usual with the teachers constantly reminding us to prepare for the upcoming final exam. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that we were ready, so as a member of our class, I didn't have to worry about that.

I got up from my chair and got ready for lunch. The enthusiastic Haruka and Airi told the three guys of the Ayanokouji Group that they made bento for all of us. But before I could approach Akito and the others, Satou suddenly approached me.

"Say, Ayanokouji-kun. Can I have some of your time? Just for a bit..."

She was uncharacteristically meek. Whenever Satou would talk to me, she was always friendly. While she didn't exude the same confidence as Kikyō or Karuizawa, Satou wasn't the type of girl to shy away when talking to a boy.

"Sure," I replied.

After notifying my friends, Satou and I walked to a corner where people didn't necessarily hang around. It was a hotspot for girls who wanted to gossip.

"Um... How have you been feeling lately...?" she asked.

"Me? Oh, I'm fine. Is there a problem?"

"W-Well... I was worried if, you know, some people might be bothering you..." Satou played with her hair as she talked.

It was a feminine body language typical of girls who are bashful or coy... but in this case, Satou looked genuinely worried. And rather than bashful, she looked embarrassed.

"Ohh... I don't think anyone's bothering me apart from Ryūen's goons. Should I keep a lookout for someone?"

"No, no, it's okay!" Satou waved her hands in a panic before turning heel. "If there's no one bothering you, then it's alright. I was just worried. Later!"

"No, no, it's not alright. As I said, Ryuuken and his classmates are bothering me..." I thought.

Before I could respond, she promptly ran away.

Satou is clearly worried about some other person bothering me, but I have no idea who they are. Unless... she's somehow connected to the abnormal increase of female attention on me. That seems like a stretch, and a bit self-conscious, but I'll keep it in mind anyway.

During lunch, I wasn't particularly questioned about my conversation with Satou. It was common for me to be approached by the girls in our class for a private talk during breaks. Most of them would ask me for advice, much like how they do with Hirata. In fact, they approached me *because* of Hirata's recommendation.

That said, our current conversation took an interesting turn.

"Oh, right. Kiyotaka-kun. Kawauchi-senpai was asking about you yesterday," said Airi.

"Eh? Really? That's surprising... I thought Kawauchi-senpai wasn't the type to be interested in guys..." Haruka commented. "But I guess if it's Kiyopon..."

If I remember correctly, Kawauchi-senpai was the president of the Photography Club.

"A-Ah, sorry. Please don't misunderstand. I don't think she was asking with any ulterior motives. Kawauchi-senpai was really just curious about Kiyotaka-kun because she'd been hearing his name a lot!"

According to Airi, Kawauchi-senpai would often hear her classmates from Class 3-B talking about me. Fortunately, it wasn't anything bad. In fact, they were complimenting me for my face and athleticism.

"Ain't that nice, Kiyotaka. Even the third-year girls are fawnin' over you."

"Your words and face don't match, Ken... Oh. Your chopsticks snapped," said Akito.

Almost two months have passed since the sports festival. The novelty of my performance should've been over after a couple of weeks, so this was certainly strange. And the timing with Satou... It's just too perfect. But then again, I can't really connect Satou with the entire senior female student body.

"I mean, I don't really know what to say."

"I would usually call bullshit on that, but your face is so damn convincing." Akito shook his head.

Thank you, face. Perhaps I was too harsh on you for looking dead all the time, but you've actually been saving me a lot of trouble.

"Obviously, I'm flattered. But--"

"You feel troubled by the attention, right?" Akito smirked. He knows me too well.

When classes ended, Hirata himself asked if we could hang out. The invite itself wasn't really out of place since Hirata and I were close friends who'd hung out plenty of times after school. But unlike most times, he didn't invite anyone else.

"I wanted to talk to you about Ryuuken-kun."

Hirata hid his disturbed feelings very well, but I guess he wanted to get to the bottom of things as soon as possible.

"Alright, lead the way."

Because it was a Monday, most cafes were filled with students. Hirata and I eventually settled for the resting area outside Keyaki Mall.

"Did you talk to him?" I asked, starting the conversation.

"No... *He* talked to me," Hirata replied. "I know most of his words were just cheap provocation, but I seriously think some of them could be true."

"Well, Ryuuken's achievements warrant that sort of trust. He's not the type of person who would talk and not back it up with action."

"Yes... That's why I'm particularly concerned about a question that he asked me."

"A question, huh? What was it?"

Hirata made a very dark expression. I've never seen him this grim before.

"Who would you rather have expelled? Ayanokouji or Kikyoku?"

It was a question full of malicious intentions.

"I wanted to pass it off as a bluff, but for some reason, I couldn't."

Did Hirata simply hate the idea of someone from our class getting expelled? Did he make such an expression because his friends were in danger? If I was a person who wasn't close to him, those questions would've been answered with a resounding yes, but as someone who's been around Hirata for a long time, I can't be so sure.

"If Ryuuken wasn't bluffing, then he's got one hell of a plan."

"I really hope not..."

Hirata wasn't his usual calm self. In the past, Ike and Yamauchi were all at risk of expulsion. And recently, Mori and Kikuchi were exposed to the same kind of danger. However, Hirata did his best to help with a positive attitude.

What could be the difference now? Was it because Kikyuu and I are more special to him than others? I don't think so.

Hirata was everyone's ally. He had never given special treatment to anyone-- No, it was more accurate to say that he *was* giving special treatment to *everyone*. He'd even go so far as to pretend to be Karuizawa's boyfriend just to protect her.

"Well? Can you protect us?"

Hirata's eyes widened in surprise after hearing my words. It almost seemed like he suddenly snapped out of a trance. He turned to look at me, unblinkingly.

"I see..." he sighed. "I've been too accustomed to relying on you, aren't I?"

I was the one protecting everyone back when I was the leader. Hirata and the others were just helping me. The responsibility was mine at the end of the day. And because Hirata trusted my abilities, he didn't feel any dread whenever we were put in a tight spot.

But things were different now. He and Horikita were the sole leaders of Class A. I'm sure Hirata was confident in his abilities, but Ryuen was a tough opponent. At this point in time, Hirata couldn't even verify whether Ryuen was bluffing or not. That's why he was starting to panic. If he failed now, the consequences would be irreversible... And that was his responsibility. He doesn't want to fail. He *can't* fail.

His changes right now-- I'd already seen glimpses of it. Back when he thought Ryuen had won against us during the sexual assault case, Hirata was starting to lose hope. He only managed to get back on his feet when Horikita and I reassured him.

"I'll try to help, but with my position, I can only do so much."

"Yes, I know that. Please don't worry, Ayanokouji-kun. If possible, I don't want to solicit your help at all. That option should only be a last resort."

"I don't mind talking about this now, though. I mean, Ryuen *did* mention my name, so even if you didn't need my help, my involvement is inevitable."

"You're right, but that doesn't really change anything. I called you here without any solutions to discuss. I thought you'd be able to give me some advice... I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It's not like I've suddenly become an anti-social freak who'd get angry if a leader like you asked me for advice."

Hirata looked at me with a bitter smile.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun..."

In the end, I gave Hirata some generic yet practical advice. I told him to focus on the exam as well as their plan with Hondou and Miyamoto. If he can't think of any reason why Ryuen would

specifically mention me and Kikyou, then he probably didn't have to worry about it right now.

Vol. 6: Chapter 9.2 - Desperation

The next day, Class A finally took on Horikita's mock test. Chabashira-sensei had given us permission to use the homeroom period for it.

Everyone had serious expressions, and before we knew it, the test was finally over.

"Thank you for answering the mock test," announced Horikita. "We'll have the results ready by Friday, so please reflect on any errors you have after receiving your paper. You'll have the weekend for a last-ditch review."

As expected, everything turned out fine. The questions we made for this mock test were just as hard as the ones we did for Class C. I'm interested to see what the results are after Horikita and Hirata check them.

When the final bell rang, which marked the end of today's classes, a person approached me before I could even stand up.

"Hey, Ayanokouji."

Miyamoto stood in front of me with a... *confrontational* expression.

"Miyamoto...?"

Only a handful of students turned their heads. Most of our classmates probably saw this talk as a casual classroom conversation. He leaned in close enough so only the two of us could hear each other.

"Are you going to help Horikita-san with our plan against Ryuuen?" he asked.

"Oh, no. I'm out of the picture this time. I don't really have much to offer," I replied.

"You do, though. *You're* Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. You're the smartest person in this school," he said with narrowed eyes.

"Am I now? Do you seriously believe that, Miyamoto?"

"Maybe I do. Maybe it's just flattery. But regardless of what I think, it's a fact that you can help us. You're the one who carried us to Class A, after all."

"Even if I did, I already told everyone that I don't wanna get involved as much anymore."

Miyamoto clicked his tongue in frustration.

"Look, I'm not trying to make you feel obligated to do anything

since I also respect your decision. I'm on your side when you say you wanna do anything you want... but I really need your help this time."

Whether I say yes or not wouldn't really matter. I can already guess what's going to happen regardless of my answer.

"Ayanokouji, are you going to help me or not?"

I looked at the sliding door and made a condition. If Karuizawa's group gets out first, then I'll say yes. If Kikyuu's group gets out first, then I'll say no.

"Ayanokouji...?"

Hmm... They're still talking, but I guess that makes sense. We just answered a test. I'm sure they wanted to chat about that. For now, I'll try to stall for time. I gazed down and made an excuse.

"I'm trying to think..."

"Uhh... Sure."

I can see another group start to move. From my periphery, I could recognize Satou, Matsushita, and Shinohara. I briefly adjusted myself and saw Ichihashi and Azuma with them.

As far as I remember, Azuma doesn't really vibe with Shinohara and Satou. I wonder how they're gonna hang out.

"Ah-"

"Oh, got an answer?"

I can't believe it. Their group actually went ahead and got out first. The outcome wasn't either of my conditions. I guess that calls for a new and third one. Not that it matters.

"Yeah... To be honest, I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure my help is unnecessary, but I'll think about it for now."

Bam

Miyamoto slammed his hands on my desk which made a loud sound. Suddenly, the classroom went quiet. Everyone looked in our direction. Even the girls from Matsushita's group peeked their heads inside to see what was up, along with some students from other classes.

"We're running out of time, Ayanokouji. At this rate... I might get expelled!" Miyamoto pleaded in a whisper, as quietly as he could, but the intensity of his delivery made him sound like he was hissing.

Looking at our classmates' confused faces, it didn't seem like they understood what he was saying.

Should I say yes now, or should I just say no?

Alright, I'll make another condition. If Hirata approaches us first, then I'll say yes. If Horikita approaches us first, then I'll say no. If Kikyuu approaches us first, then I'll keep saying that I'm going to think about it.

"Are you alri--" Hirata managed to stand up, but someone signaled him to stay put.

Horikita walked in our direction to ask what was happening.

Crap, I deliberately put Horikita on "no" because she was the least likely person to approach us among the three... Now things are about to get a bit more hectic.

But a condition is a condition. I have to follow through.

"Is everything okay, Miyamoto-kun?" asked Horikita.

"It's fine, Horikita-san. I'm sorry. I was just out of it for a second," he replied.

Horikita's eyes turned to me, asking for an answer. I didn't really say anything, but she could probably already guess it.

"I won't meddle if it's a personal conversation, but please try to refrain from conflict."

She turned around and left us alone. With the "commotion" over, everyone just brushed us off with slightly concerned looks.

"Uhh, do you wanna talk somewhere else?" I asked.

"No... I just want an answer. Will you help me or not...?"

I can't really sum up the feelings that Miyamoto was trying to show on his face. Was it grief? Was it hope? Maybe it was anger.

I sighed from my seat and looked up to the standing Miyamoto. He could already tell that I'd made up my mind.

"Sorry, but I really don't wanna get involved with this anymore. I can't help you."

My table made a loud screeching sound as its legs scratched against the floor.

Miyamoto didn't say anything. He just grabbed my collar and glared at me while gnashing his teeth. I wondered what he was thinking right now.

Everyone gasped in shock. The situation rose to a fifty and Horikita diffused it back to zero. But just when things relaxed, it suddenly shot up to a hundred.

"Miyamoto-kun!" Hirata tried to close in on us, but Miyamoto quickly let go of me.

Ken and Akito, who sprinted towards us, also stopped in their tracks.

"Sorry, Ayanokouji... Forget about everything I said."

His contemptuous eyes looked down on me. This time, I knew they were real.

"S-Soshi?! Wait!"

Miyamoto left the classroom with Hondou running behind him. Ike and Yamauchi followed them as well.

"Hey, Miyamoto! Get your ass back here!" yelled Ken.

"Stop that, dude."

"Ayanokouji-kun, what just happened?" Hirata asked.

"I'm not too sure myself," I shrugged like it wasn't a big deal.

The nature of my response made everyone feel a bit relieved, but they became even more confused as to why Miyamoto acted the way he did.

Thankfully, Hirata left it at that, so none of my classmates tried to pry. I'm sure Haruka and the others will bombard me with questions later, though. That said, it was inevitable for Horikita to be curious about what just happened. She probably never expected such a development.

"Ayanokouji-kun..." she meekly called out to me while everyone else left the classroom.

I knew why Horikita was worried, but she didn't to be. To be honest, I don't really feel like talking about this right now, but it's better to detach myself from all of this as soon as possible. I just want to relax and binge on some books.

"Don't worry. I just told him that I won't help with the plan."

"That's it...? I see... Miyamoto-kun must've been desperate."

Desperate, huh...? That, I don't know. From what I understand about this situation as a whole, I personally don't think Miyamoto is desperate... But I can't say the same in the near future.

Vol. 6: Chapter 9.3 - Sarcasm

The next day, Miyamoto and I didn't really talk. Some of my friends felt concerned about us, but as long as we didn't bother each other, I think it'll be fine.

When lunch break came along, a surprise guest appeared by the door of Class A. Well, two surprise guests, to be exact.

"W-What is b-b-baldy doing here?!" Ike instantly reacted to his presence with a rude nickname.

"Fufufu, that's not very nice."

Appearing behind Katsuragi was Sakayanagi. Now, everyone was even more surprised. Why would the two faction leaders of Class B suddenly come to our classroom?

"Is Ayanokouji here?" asked Katsuragi.

Well, there's our answer.

I stood up and walked towards them. I could hear my classmates murmuring about the current course of events, but I couldn't really do anything about it. Even my friends looked confused, understandably so.

"Sorry for delaying your lunchtime, but can we take a little bit of your time?" Sakayanagi smiled.

"Sure, I guess..."

I really wanted to eat now, so I had no choice but to hear them out and end this as soon as possible. I don't really have any problem with people talking to me for the sake of socializing, but considering that it's these two, I doubt that was the reason.

After walking to the end of the hallway near the stairs, I mustered up the courage to talk first.

"You're not with your usual company, Sakayanagi," I said, glancing at the security camera near us.

"Oh, are you talking about Masumi-san? She's currently having lunch with some of our classmates. Did you prefer to have her here with us?"

What an incredibly misleading response. I can instantly see its effect after looking at Katsuragi's reaction.

"I honestly thought you were romantically involved with Kushida. I didn't think you were interested in Kamuro..."

"Seriously, Katsuragi... Sakayanagi was obviously just teasing me. I have no romantic feelings towards Kamuro whatsoever. We

haven't even had a proper conversation."

"Ohh, is that so...? My bad."

Sakayanagi chuckled while listening to our exchange.

"Let's just get this over with... Why did you want to talk to me?" I sighed.

"I'll be honest, Ayanokouji. This was Sakayanagi's idea and she just asked me to accompany her. I have no clue what this is all about."

"Katsuragi-kun is right. But I also didn't think he'd agree to come with me," she said, giving him a side-eye. "I thought you'd refuse, or at least, be more guarded. But you immediately said yes after a quick think."

"Well, of course. I have my own agenda."

"Fufu, I see. Your honesty is very convenient, Katsuragi-kun."

"Then I'll hear you out first, Sakayanagi." I put my hands inside my pocket and focused my attention on her.

The lilac hair of the girl in front of me swayed gently. Her cane stood straight as she held its end with her two dainty hands.

"I would like to make some clarifications about our promise."

"Promise?"

Sakayanagi shook her head with a sigh.

"No... I don't think we can even call it that. I was just arbitrarily pushing my desires onto you. But this time, I want us to make things clear."

"Alright. Tell me what you have in mind."

"Then... Are you willing to fight me seriously after the conditions have been met?"

Despite not knowing anything about our conversation, Katsuragi just listened quietly. His lack of reaction puts me at ease.

However, everything changed after Sakayanagi said those words. His eyes widened momentarily as he stared at Sakayanagi in shock. From his perspective, it might've been the natural reaction. Sakayanagi was Class B's leader. Anyone who knew her abilities would put her on a pedestal far higher than where the likes of Ichinose or Ryuen stood. Even Katsuragi, her enemy, wasn't an exception to this.

Some might argue that Class B only started winning because *I* stepped down, but Sakayanagi's classmates don't have an intimate understanding of my abilities. So in their eyes, Class B started winning *because* Sakayanagi took over. In terms of knowing me, Katsuragi or Hashimoto would take the top spot if I excluded Sakayanagi herself. The fact that Katsuragi was still shocked only cemented her reputation and unshakable position inside their class.

Sakayanagi Arisu was talking to someone else like she was a mere

challenger? To them, that idea was absurd.

"Sure. You're here to discuss what those conditions are, right? I'm all ears."

"Thank you. Then, I'll present you with a choice. Would it be when your class drops back to Class D, or would it be when your class points go down to a certain amount?"

"I'm fine with either. But guessing from the type of person you are, I don't think you want things to be too easy."

"Fufufu. You understand me quite well. Alright. 400 points it is."

"Sorry, Sakayanagi, but I have to butt in. From what I understand, *you're* planning to challenge Ayanokouji. That, I don't mind not prying into... But regarding the "*condition*"... Are you saying that you'll make Class A's class points drop all the way down to a mere 400?"

"You didn't mishear anything, Katsuragi-kun. That is indeed what I said." Sakayanagi's eyes had a glint of ruthlessness.

"Are you serious...?"

"Oh my. Do you think I'm joking?"

Katsuragi didn't respond. He started to ponder on his own. Sakayanagi gave a very specific number. If she didn't have a realistic plan to achieve that goal, why would she even say it in the first place?

"Cutting their class points down to 400 within a specific timeframe is very possible... as long as Ayanokouji-kun doesn't do anything."

"If I interfere, wouldn't it defeat the purpose of our so-called "*promise*"?"

"That's right. I didn't think you'd try to, anyway."

Katsuragi turned to me with a stern look.

"I might be too late in asking this... but did the two of you know each other before enrolling here?"

Sakayanagi giggled happily in response. Seems like she wanted me to answer on our behalf.

"It's a bit complicated."

A quick and simple response. Firstly, I didn't meet Sakayanagi until about two months ago. And even then, we barely even talked. Even if Sakayanagi knew my identity as a White Room student, we can't really consider our relationship as childhood friends. As kids, even if she saw me, she didn't really meet me. In short, it's complicated. I could give him a simplified explanation without mentioning the White Room, but honestly, I'm too lazy to do so.

"I see. It's fine then. Please forget I asked," he understandingly nodded.

Somehow, I felt like his question was a precedent to a very

troublesome conversation.

"It's your turn, Katsuragi-kun."

He nodded and crossed his arms.

"As Sakayanagi had implied, I also wanted to talk to you. It was my reason for agreeing to accompany her, but I guess she knew that already."

"That's fine. What did you want to talk about?"

"I wanted your opinion on this exam."

"My opinion...? I think it's fine. I'm aware that we're at a big disadvantage. Class B and Class C are better than us in academics, after all."

"Based on your conversation earlier, it seems like your role had totally changed after you stepped down as your class's leader."

"Well, yeah. Horikita and Hirata are the brains of Class A now. I don't really want to get involved with that anymore. I'm currently just a regular member of the class."

"I understand... But if you were the leader of your class right now, what would you do to win this exam?"

"I haven't thought about it, but maybe I'll do the same thing as Horikita."

"I see. According to what you're saying, you think Horikita's current methods will win you the exam?"

"Well, I personally can't judge that. Our classmates have started with lower base specs than you guys did, but only time will tell whether they can close the gap or not."

"I get that argument, but the data from the past two exams is all you need to see to have a reliable prediction. It's not like your classmates are the only ones studying hard for the exam, you know?"

"I guess you're right... In that case, we can leave it up to chance."

Katsuragi narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"I believe in hard work and diligence, and I think your class will get stellar results in the exam, but I don't see you guys getting higher overall scores than Class B or Class C. Horikita's method lacks security and creativity. It might've worked if her classmates were on par with ours or Ichinose's classmates, but sadly, that's not the case..."

He sighed and shook his head.

"To be honest, I would've believed your words if you hadn't had that conversation with Sakayanagi earlier. I don't think you're being genuine about your response. If you're really the person that Sakayanagi was making you out to be, then I don't think you'll stop at simply making your classmates *"study hard"*."

I got called out, but that was to be expected. I wouldn't bother

thinking about a solution to a problem that I'm not obliged to solve.

"Fufufu. How disappointing, Katsuragi-kun. You should've figured that out the moment Ayanokouji-kun said he'd do the same thing as Horikita-san," said Sakayanagi. "His real answer was as clear as day: *"It won't happen, so I don't care."* Isn't that correct, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"You might be right. I'm honestly a lazy person, so I just want to do the bare minimum when it comes to these things."

The speechless Katsuragi sighed exasperatedly.

"Are you satisfied, Katsuragi-kun? I think we've taken too much of Ayanokouji-kun's time already."

"Frankly, I don't know what to believe anymore. The image you painted of him was a mysterious and fearsome opponent, but the person I talked to just now... was nothing but a detached and honestly, selfish, high school student."

"That's pretty harsh, but I'll keep your words in mind, Katsuragi."

"Feel free to do whatever you want... I'm not so dumb as to believe your act." He turned around with a dismissive wave.

"Well then, please enjoy your lunch, Ayanokouji-kun. We'll be on our way now." Sakayanagi retreated with a faint smile.

"Sure," I replied.

"You're a very strong adversary," Katsuragi briefly stopped. "So in the future, I wish to have a real conversation with you."

With that leave-taking, the two of them continued walking down the hallway.

Did I go too far? Katsuragi looked really fed up. But then again, all he did was ask troublesome questions. He can't blame me for being a bit sarcastic.

Vol. 6: Chapter 10.1 - Plan of Action

At the end of the school week, Horikita gave everyone their mock test results.

"You'll have tonight, tomorrow, and Sunday to use these as guides for your final review. Good luck, everyone. I believe that our hard work will bear fruit in the final exams."

Horikita's closing announcement made everyone cheer in glee. Their motivation was at its peak after seeing a nice overall result for the mock test.

Everyone left in high spirits, but the same couldn't really be said for Horikita and Hirata, the leaders of Class A. In less than three days, we'll take the actual Paper Shuffle Exam. But before that, they'll have to submit the test questions we've created.

"Kiyopon! Let's go?" Haruka called out to me with a big smile.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

Well, there's no need for me to worry about them. It's not my responsibility now.

As our group walked down the road home, someone suddenly called out to us.

"Hey, guys!" Miyamoto ran up to us with slightly ragged breath.

"The hell are you doing here?" asked Ken.

Everyone in my group immediately gave him the stink-eye. Well, I don't think Airi was doing the same, but she didn't look pleased either.

"If it's not a bother, is it alright if I talk to you for a bit, Ayankouji?"

My friends were able to realize that Miyamoto wanted to talk about our current situation. My silence also gave away how I felt about his proposition. All of them gave me a shrug and turned around.

"We'll be at the usual convenience store," said Akito.

Airi and Haruka waved at me while Ken continued glaring at Miyamoto.

Before long, the two of us were finally alone.

"Look, I know I did something uncalled for a few days ago, so I want to take this chance to apologize." Miyamoto meekly scratched his head.

I'm sure it felt out of character for everyone, but I always knew

Miyamoto had his reasons.

"Ryuuen told you to do it, didn't he?"

"Yeah, that's right... Did Horikita-san tell you about the possibility of another traitor?"

"No, she didn't, but I won't be surprised if that was the case."

"Like Kikuchi and Mori, I'm just forced to cooperate with Ryuuen. Yelling at you was just another order from him."

"What did he tell you?"

"Cause a commotion by picking a fight with Ayanokouji. Make it flashy... That's what he told me."

"And why did he want you to do that, exactly?"

"I'll be honest. I have no idea. I know about the immediate effect, though. The class thinks I've gone crazy now. Maybe Ryuuen just wanted to torment me."

"I think they'll forget it over time, but I'm sure it sucks that you can't make yourself clear to everyone."

"Yeah, dude... Even now, I'm still a bit scared about talking to you. No offense, but we can't be sure that none of your friends is the traitor-- if there even is one."

Still, since Miyamoto still talked to me even after seeing me with my friends, it's safe to say that they're the people he least suspects.

"Of course. Without any clues, anyone can be a suspect. But why did you want to tell me about it now?"

"The timing. Since today is the submission day, I'm sure Ryuuen will be busy bothering Horikita and Hirata. And personally, I don't mind if our classmates think I'm a bipolar weirdo, but you're an exception. I want you to know that I'm not genuinely trying to antagonize you."

"I mean, I didn't really think that... And even if I did, it's not like I can do anything about it."

"Hey, c'mon now, Ayanokouji. I'd be scared if someone like you were to go after me. I wouldn't be surprised if I get expelled by you as a result."

"You must be joking..." I shook my head. "But even then, it's not like I'd try to expel someone over a simple quarrel."

"I see... That's a relief, I guess. I'm clueless as to why Ryuuen gave me that order, but at least he was happy about the result."

He must've been.

After Miyamoto left, I met up with my friends who hung around the dining area adjacent to the convenience store.

"How was it, Kiyopon?"

"It was alright. Miyamoto just wanted to apologize."

"Ohh, at least he's got the balls to do that..." Akito nodded,

seemingly impressed.

"Pfft. Yamauchi and Ike would probably double down," said Ken.

"Are you sure you're alright, Kiyotaka-kun?" Airi came up to me and asked.

"I'm alright, Airi. Thanks for worrying about me."

Her innocent smile relaxed the weary atmosphere.

I went inside the convenience store to buy an ice cream, but before doing so, I opened up my phone and called someone.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Ijuuin, there's something I need you to prepare."

Along with some instructions, I also told Ijuuin about a particular someone who would ask to see his call history.

As Hirata-kun and I tread the hallways on the way to the teacher's faculty, a wave of sudden anxiety coursed through my heart.

"I feel like... something else is going on behind all of this," I muttered.

Because we were the only ones walking, Hirata could clearly hear what I'd said.

"Don't worry, Horikita-san. You're not the only one who feels that way."

I thought we had a good start during the sports festival, but Sakayanagi-san immediately put us back in our place. Thankfully, we managed to keep the class morale afloat.

"It's really frustrating."

We could just be overthinking things, but after everything I've seen beside Ayanokouji-kun, it's better to be safe than sorry.

"It is frustrating, but that will change today, huh?" Hirata-kun furrowed his eyebrows.

"Yes... If everything goes as planned, then we'll finally have something to work with."

After making a turn, the door to the teacher's faculty was finally in our line of sight. Before the two of us could continue our conversation, the door opened and a single person came out.

"Oh, what a coincidence. Or maybe not. I guess you're really the type of person to do things last, Suzune."

Ryuuen Kakeru, an enemy of our class, walked out of the room. It seems like he'd just finished submitting Class D's test questions.

"I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd wait until the last day to

submit yours, Ryuen-kun."

"Making 400 test questions is hard, you know? I'm sure it's even more grueling if the number is doubled."

Hirata-kun and I turned stiff.

"Doubled?" I asked.

"Kukuku. It's alright. You don't have to bluff and make yourself look like an idiot. I already knew that the questions we got from Miyamoto were nothing but decoys."

He nonchalantly revealed Miyamoto-kun's name...?

"Miyamoto-kun? I see. So there was a traitor, after all." I acted dumb to not put Miyamoto-kun under the bus.

"You're not that surprised, eh? You see, I trusted you, Suzune. Isn't that cute? I knew that you'd prepare against a traitor, and I knew you weren't going to use your actual questions for that little mock test of yours. The goal was to give you guys some extra workload. I guess it didn't yield much result considering how you made Ayanokouji one of the question makers, but it wasn't a bad try. It's not like we lost anything."

As I processed everything that he said, Hirata-kun stepped up to ask another question.

"I don't think Miyamoto-kun would willingly betray the class. Are you threatening him?"

"Of course, of course. Everyone in your class is an angel, Hirata. Of course, you'd think that."

"I'm an open-minded person, Ryuen-kun. If you can prove otherwise, then I'm willing to listen."

"Heh, try again. I'm not obliged to tell you anything, you know? It's more convenient for me if the leaders of your class don't know who can be a snake."

"If you back someone into a corner, making them do your bidding is easy."

"Are you speaking from experience, Hirata?"

Ryuen-kun's question made Hirata-kun pause for a moment, but he managed to regain his composure.

"Maybe I am. After all, I've encountered countless people like you in the past."

"Is that so? Then I guess you know what to do now that another person from your class has become a pawn for the enemy."

Hirata-kun only smiled in response. He didn't need to tell Ryuen-kun about it, so he stayed silent.

The solution to this particular problem should be fairly obvious if we know the traitor's identity. It wouldn't be too hard to deal with them as long as we can control and limit the flow of information. If the traitor was an influential student like Kushida-san or Karuizawa-

san, then it would be extremely dangerous, but thankfully, Miyamoto-kun is just an ordinary student.

But the problem still remains. At the end of the day, Miyamoto-kun is still being threatened. Unless we fix that problem, we'll be stuck at a disadvantage. Hirata-kun knew that, so his smile didn't last long.

"What did you threaten Miyamoto-kun with? Violence? Bullying?" I asked him directly.

"Woah, slow down. Why are you assuming that I'm threatening him in the first place?"

"Isn't it obvious? Miyamoto-kun has no motive to willingly betray Class A."

"Kukuku. Motive, huh? What do you think is the strongest motive for a person, Suzune?"

"It depends on the person. And for Miyamoto-kun, there wouldn't be any logical explanation for him to betray us without the involvement of fear."

"Do you think he fears me?"

"I can't say. But he definitely fears whatever you're using to threaten him."

Ryuuen-kun chuckled as he shook his head.

"There you go again. You can quit trying to make me admit that I'm threatening him. Doing a false confession isn't my style."

"I see. But you should also understand that we're not obligated to believe what you're saying. For all we know, you could've been lying this entire time."

"Kukuku..." Ryuuen-kun turned around and started walking away. "We both know whose side had been lying this entire time, Suzune... and it's not me."

After his figure disappeared, we knocked on the door and finally entered the faculty room.

"Hirata, Horikita, you're finally here."

"We've prepared the questions, Sensei."

I handed the folder to her without hesitation. Chabashira-sensei started reading the paper inside. After a few minutes, the remaining teachers inside left the room.

"Good. Since this is the last day, you're no longer allowed to make any changes. If any of these questions are deemed invalid, we'll automatically replace them with the easier questions we've prepared in advance."

"We understand."

Chabashira-sensei emotionlessly tucked the folder away.

"Alright, I think that's enough time stalled."

Hirata-kun and I nodded.

"Good job, Horikita. The mock questions you've made *did* lure out someone."

Before I realized it, I'd already tightened my fists. Luring out the real traitor was the true purpose of the mock test. It seems like someone took the bait and tried to submit the mock test questions.

"Who was it...?"

"It was Miyamoto," she answered.

"Miyamoto-kun, huh...? We should've expected this," I said.

"Since Ryuen-kun knew about the questions being a decoy, I guess it would make sense for him to give this order, too..." added Hirata-kun.

Our lackluster reaction left Chabashira-sensei looking confused.

"Did you already suspect that Miyamoto was the traitor?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly..."

We decided to fill her in on what we've gathered so far.

"I see... The situation looks clear at first glance, but some of the events that occurred would make you think twice..." Chabashira-sensei pondered.

There was no room for further discussion, so we left everything at that.

When Hirata-kun and I walked home together, we immediately decided on the next plan of action.

"Ryuen-kun was definitely aware," I said.

"Yeah... He avoided confessing the entire time..."

I prepared for an encounter with Ryuen-kun and equipped myself with one of Ayanokouji-kun's bugs. Even if Miyamoto-kun fails to record anything substantial, we'd have a backup card if we succeeded in making Ryuen-kun confess earlier.

Unfortunately, we failed.

"Do you suspect Miyamoto-kun?" I asked, shifting the topic.

"I don't want to," he answered. "But if he's an actual traitor, I won't side with him."

"Then we'll have to find that out first," I sighed. "I have a plan. Is Karuizawa-san willing to help?"

Hirata-kun's eyes lit up with resolve.

"I'll definitely convince her."

I nodded as I explained the details.

Vol. 6: Chapter 10.2 - Missing Pieces

December 4th, 10:21 AM. Saturday.

"Hello, Nii-san."

"Suzune. It's rare for you to call me directly."

I was on my way to Keyaki Mall when I contacted my brother. His voice was flat, devoid of any emotion. It was certainly the Nii-san that I know.

"There's something that I would like to ask."

"What is it?"

"Did anyone from the first-years sign a memorandum recently?"

If my hunch is correct...

"Yes, that's right."

My footsteps halted with his confirmation.

"Are the details available for disclosure?"

"According to the contract, their identities are to remain anonymous to outside parties, so the existence of the signing is the only thing that I can confirm."

"I understand, Nii-san. Thank you for the information."

Nii-san probably knew that I was fighting this battle from the frontline. He'd only be disappointed if I linger around unnecessarily. So, I hung up and briskly walked to our meeting spot before dialing another number.

"Hello, Karuizawa-san?"

"Oh, Horikita-san. We're ready," she said.

"Alright. I'll be there in a bit."

The tension inside my stomach started to ramp up. Once everything gets unveiled, there's no telling what the final results will be... Will our class be able to unite, or will a rift start to form...?

"Ah, Horikita-san, you're here!" Mori-san waved at me.

She was always hanging around Karuizawa-san and her group during the first semester, but recently, I've noticed that her time with them started decreasing.

"Good morning, Mori-san."

Hirata-kun and my group held a small joint study session inside a karaoke room. While our groups weren't necessarily complete, some who didn't even belong to either of our groups came.

When Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san saw me arrive, they knew it was time to start.

"Alright, everyone. Thank you for attending today's study session," Hirata-kun announced. "Even if this will be our last day of studying together before the real thing happens, I hope everyone can still do their best."

The speech to start things off gathered all the eyes. Amidst the attention that Hirata-kun was receiving, I looked at Karuizawa-san who nodded in affirmation. She and Maezono-san will take it from here.

According to Karuizawa-san, she could use Sonoda-san or Ishikura-san to keep things under the rug because they were the type to not question her orders. But on the other hand, the plan's potency might fail given their softer nature. If I wanted things to go more smoothly, she needed someone like Shinohara-san or Maezono-san. But, they weren't the type to cooperate without knowing what they were going into.

Of course, I wanted efficiency, so I chose the latter option. And since Maezono-san was part of Hirata-kun's study group, Karuizawa-san naturally chose her to be the accomplice. I didn't really mind if Karuizawa-san told her about the true purpose of this plan as long as it was only her.

The study session finally started, and everything should proceed normally until much later.

After an hour...

Hirata-kun and I suggested a break so we could have our lunch. While waiting for the food that we ordered, everyone started passing the songbook around. But before the room got dominated by the sound of music, Karuizawa-san finally opened her mouth.

"Hey, Masami-chan, you've been on your phone since earlier. Are you chatting with a guy?" she asked.

"W-What? No..." Maezono-san answered, looking flustered.

"You too, Miyamoto-kun!" Karuizawa-san pointed to the person directly in front of her across the table. "You're the ones chatting with each other, aren't you?!"

"T-The heck? How did I get roped into this?!" replied Miyamoto.

"Hey, Hirata-kun~! These two are flirting while everyone's taking their studies seriously!"

"Karuizawa-san, you're wrong!" Maezono repeatedly shook her head.

"Well, show me proof then. Show me your conversation Miyamoto-kun," Karuizawa-san smirked.

Karuizawa-san was impressive. I've seen her behave like this in

the classroom many times before, so everything seemed natural. But right now, I also know that she's doing it on purpose. And because of that, I'm starting to feel like most of her aggressive undertakings in the classroom were nothing but acts-- very convincing ones.

I started pondering why I'd think that way, and surprisingly, I managed to quickly arrive at an answer. A person who behaves like her is, more often than not, an idiot. But ever since I became more closely involved with Karuizawa-san, I realized that she's much smarter than what she lets on, at least in the social sense. If she was really as domineering and close-minded as everyone thinks, then there's no way she'd choose to cooperate with someone like me.

In terms of social skills, she's not that behind someone like Kushida-san.

"Alright, alright... If that's what will satisfy you..." Maezono-san reluctantly agreed.

She seamlessly went along with Karuizawa-san's show. It almost seemed practiced, but I'm sure they didn't have the time to do that. I thought Maezono-san was also amazing.

"Ah-! My battery is dead!" she cried.

"What, really? I can't believe this," Karuizawa-san sighed. "Well, it can't be helped then. Hey, show me your phone instead."

She leaned forward and ordered Miyamoto-kun.

"Huh? Why should I?" he protested.

"What's your deal, Karuizawa? You think you can just say whatever you want?" Hondou-kun, who sat beside him, came to his friend's rescue.

"Hah? Firstly, I'm not talking to you. Secondly, you can just shut up."

"The hell?!"

Karuizawa-san started arguing with Hondou-kun, before sneakily giving Maezono-san a side-eye. Everyone else looked at me and Hirata-kun with uncomfortable expressions. They were probably expecting us to intervene.

"Please, Miyamoto. Just show Karuizawa-san the conversation between us so we can get over this. It's not like we have anything to hide, you know?"

"Argh, fine! I'll do it!"

Hearing this, Miyamoto-kun had no choice but to comply.

He opened his phone and tapped away. After a brief second of navigating, he presented his screen to Karuizawa-san.

"Here, look at how clean my conscience is!"

"Let's see!"

"Hey, wai-!"

Karuizawa-san swiftly nabbed the phone out of his hands.

Miyamoto-kun panicked and tried to take it, but Karuizawa-san plopped back to her seat. Miyamoto-kun leaned forward to take it back, but Maezono-san blocked him with her hands.

"It'll be fine! Just let Karuizawa-san read it a bit!"

"What's there to read?!"

One second...

Maezono-san was bound to get overpowered by Miyamoto-kun, so Hirata-kun and I instantly made our moves to further stall more time.

Two seconds...

"Karuizawa-san, I think you're being a bit too unreasonable right now," he said.

Three seconds...

"Calm down, Miyamoto-kun. We'll get your phone back for you," I followed.

Four seconds...

Karuizawa-san furrowed her brows, investing all of her focus on Miyamoto-kun's phone.

Five seconds.

"Hey, Karuizawa! Give that back!"

Six seconds.

"Alright, fine!"

Miyamoto-kun quickly grabbed his phone and instantly began checking it.

"You didn't do anything, right?" he asked angrily.

"I didn't. Why would I do that? I told you, I was just reading your messages with Masami-chan."

"My conversations with Maezono are literally just questions about class. You could've skimmed through all of it in a second or two!"

"I'm a slow reader," she answered while crossing her arms.

Petty and dumb. That was probably how the boys from Class A boys looked at Karuizawa-san.

"Now, now. Everything's back to normal, and no one was harmed. Karuizawa-san, I think you went a bit too far with taking Miyamoto-kun's phone. You disrespected his privacy, so you should probably apologize." Hirata-kun restfully pleaded with his girlfriend.

"Ehh, really?" Karuizawa-san heaved an exasperated sigh. "Well, I guess I'm sorry. I wouldn't want someone to grab my phone like that."

"Thanks for showing her the messages, Miyamoto. I just didn't want a misunderstanding to spread," said Maezono-san.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever..." Miyamoto rolled his eyes in annoyance.

With the commotion over, the study session continued on as

normal. Karuizawa-san's little scheme went exactly as planned which made me respect her more. But putting that aside, she looked at us with a darker expression. I can already make some guesses about what she saw.

After a couple of hours, the study session was finally over. All of our classmates went straight home, including Maezono-san. Everyone probably wanted to have some more fun in the karaoke, but it's good that they managed to exercise some restraint.

"So I can finally talk about what I saw, right?" Karuizawa-san spoke.

The three of us were walked together, close enough so we can hear the person beside us.

"Did you look at the messages between him and Ryuen-kun?" asked Hirata-kun.

"Of course, I did. But there was nothing suspicious about them. Ryuen-kun was just sending him vague messages about his crush."

He was careful enough to not send threatening messages, huh?

"But even if he did send threats, I'm sure they're not real..." she continued.

"You mean to say...?"

"I'm pretty sure Miyamoto-kun is a traitor. A real one at that."

"What did you see, Karuizawa-san?" Hirata-kun's face turned grim.

"Three million-- almost four million private points..."

"Four million...? That's way higher than I've anticipated."

Since their messages were useless, the only viable evidence would be Miyamoto-kun's private point balance.

"How many points did you see, exactly?" I asked.

"I can't remember, but I'm sure that it was more than 3.7 million..."

"It matches," I looked at Hirata-kun.

"What do you mean?" Karuizawa-san asked, turning to him as well.

"You see, sometime during November, I asked Hondou-kun about how much private points he had left. He told me that it was a little over 600,000 points. I also asked about Miyamoto-kun and he said that they were about the same. Now that it's December, he should have at least 700,000 points if he didn't do any big spending," Hirata-kun explained.

Casual conversations can contain key information, and someone like Hirata-kun can easily acquire them. I wonder if I can learn this method as well...?

"And the additional three million points came from Ryuen-kun,

huh...?" Karuizawa-san held her chin.

"Most likely. I contacted the student council president, and I've confirmed that some first-years signed a memorandum. I don't know the specifics, but this kind of amount wouldn't be transferred on a whim..."

"Alright... For now, let's say that Miyamoto-kun is indeed a real traitor, and his motive is the large number of private points offered by Ryuen-kun... But now I'm even more confused. What's there for Ryuen-kun to gain in all of this? He didn't even succeed in trying to sabotage us for the Paper Shuffle."

"I... still don't know."

"Maybe it was a contract that lasts until graduation?" said Karuizawa-san.

"That's certainly possible, but isn't it pretty much useless now since we know his identity?"

"You're right... Maybe Ryuen-kun is trying to mislead. If he did sign such a contract with the traitor from our class, he'd probably take extra measures to hide their identity. But during our confrontation with him yesterday, he didn't even hesitate in mentioning Miyamoto-kun's name..."

Miyamoto-kun's betrayal.

His quarrel with Ayanokouji-kun.

An absurd amount of private points.

Ryuen-kun's nonchalant words.

The details of their contract.

These pieces aren't complete. I'm still missing something...

I need to hurry. If I don't find it soon, things might already be too late.

If *he* was here, I'm sure he'd have an idea... But I can't rely on him forever. Hirata-kun and others are there to help me. We should be able to do this.

Character Notes:

Name of Student: *Maezono Masami**

Class Representative: *Horikita Suzune*

Gender: *Female*

Birthday: *August 16th*

Height: *160 cm (5'2")*

Hair Color: *Black*

Eye Color: *Brown*

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: **C**

Intelligence: **C+**

Decision-Making: **C**

Physical Ability: **B+**

Cooperativeness: **C-**

Personality: Maezono is generally known to be a strong-willed girl. Like Karuizawa, she's not afraid to voice her opinions out among fellow girls. Maezono dislikes girls who are shy and meek. She's annoyed with the fact they're either acting to look cute or just frustrating to talk to because they can't communicate properly. However, this slowly changed when she became friends with Ishikura Kayoko. While her looks aren't on par with girls like Matsushita Chiaki or Kushida Kikyou, her social skills still earned her a lot of friends. And her headstrong personality made them see her as someone reliable.

Hobbies: Maezono's favorite pastime is watching dramas on TV or the internet. She surprisingly loves cute things despite being described as rugged or even crass. She likes drinking coffee and hated tea in the past, but started liking it around the end of her middle school days.

Abilities: Maezono is one of the more athletic girls in the class. Her physical abilities are well above average, on par with Matsushita Chiaki or Kushida Kikyou. She is also fairly observant and her personality of sp makes her charismatic.

Gallery:

(Source: Pinterest)

Author's Notes:

Maezono doesn't exist in the anime. While she was one of the final runners in Volume 5, she was replaced by Matsushita in the adaptation.

Some idiots still think that the one who ran in the anime and gave the baton to Kikyou was Maezono, so don't be confused about that. We still don't know what she looks like, so as usual, I'll be going with a stand-in appearance.

Vol. 6: Chapter 10.3 - The Saturday of an Observer

"What a good day..." I unintentionally muttered.

I arrived at Keyaki Mall a few minutes before it opened. There were very few people who came inside, but that's precisely why I'm here.

"Shopping on a Saturday morning is the best," I thought.

Everyone was busy studying, so I didn't have to worry about being around many people at the mall. There was a small sale for some items in a lot of the stores, so I could take my time picking out the ones I really liked.

However, there was one thing that I've been interested in lately.

"Ah, there it is."

I walked inside the department store and looked through the featured items.

"Good morning, sir. Would you like some assistance with your shopping?" A male employee greeted me with a smile.

"Hm... Yes, please."

I haven't done much research, so I'll take his advice.

"Alright. Without further ado, let's talk about the featured ones here. This is the *Gemilai CRM3200D Professional Semi-automatic Coffee Maker Commercial Italian Espresso Coffee M 1.7L!*"

"How good is it compared to the others?"

"Well, first of all, it has a very nice high-precision PID electronic controller which would help you brew your espresso down to its most refined form."

"Does it have pressure relief?" I asked.

"For sure! It has a three-way pressure relief so you won't have to worry about removing your portafilter after a shot."

"What about an electro-mechanical pump?"

"Ohh, you've done your homework, dear customer. Why, yes. This one has it, but if you want to ask about the exact number, this machine has an UKLA pump that will deliver at least 15 BAR pressure!"

"I see... What's the basket size of the portafilter, by the way?"

"It's a 58mm basket. The prime size."

"A dual boiler?"

"Certainly-- a 500 ml S.S. boiler and a 1 L aluminum boiler," he nodded with a smile.

"Then what about a water filter?"

"Of course, it has one built-in."

Damn... This guy's good. He immediately presented a product that has everything a home espresso machine should have...

"How much is it?"

"Originally, it cost around 120,000 points. However, thanks to our limited-time sale, you can have it for just 70,000 points!"

The drop in price makes it really tempting... The one they featured looks brand-new, as well.

"I see. That's very nice, but I would like to hear more about the other ones."

"Why, of course!" he replied enthusiastically. "Have you heard about the best-selling brand; Breville?"

For now, I quickly dialed up the coffee expert I know.

A few minutes later, I finally got a call.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Of course, sir."

He was showcasing his third espresso machine when my phone rang.

I turned around and answered the call.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Ichihashi, hey. Sorry for bothering you all of a sudden."

"Oh, it's fine. I was actually planning on doing some shopping today, so we can meet up if you're down."

"No problem. We can grab lunch once you're here."

"Sure! I'm basically done preparing, so I'll be out of the dorm soon. See you in a bit~!"

"Okay, see you."

After some time passed, the employee finally finished showcasing the sixth espresso machine. I felt my phone vibrate inside my pocket a minute ago, so I'll have to stop and make a decision for now.

"I think that's enough. I've narrowed my choices down to three," I said.

"And that would be?"

"The Gemilai CRM3200D is great, for sure. But I also liked the HiBREW Express and the Breville Barista Express."

"My, those are amazing choices, sir. What would you like to take home?"

"I'd have to consult a friend about it first, so I'll be leaving for a

bit. Is that okay?"

"Of course. As you already know, most of our student customers are busy, so our services will be focused on just a few patrons today. Please take your time," he respectfully answered.

"Alright, I'll be back after lunch."

I walked back to the entrance and left the department store. Most customers who only wanted to do some window shopping would leave without returning, but the employee probably sensed that I genuinely wanted to buy something. That's why he responded in such a way, believing that I would come back.

After checking my messages, I made my way to a certain cafe and found my friend waiting in front.

"Hey there," Ichihashi waved.

Her brown hair was illuminated by the faint glow of the sun. Her stylish outfit emphasized the arrival of the cold season. With a cup of coffee in hand, Ichihashi's appearance resembled that of a beautiful painting. It only took one look for me to sincerely feel a deep admiration for her style.

"Hey," I waved back.

She stood up and met me halfway.

"You look great, Ichihashi. You're as stylish as usual." I gave her an honest compliment.

She blushed for a second but chuckled soon after.

"Thanks for the compliment, but you can't be saying that to me so casually, you know? I might start to think that you're leading me on," she smiled.

"You know that wasn't my intention."

"Of course," Ichihashi smirked before leaning close to my ear. "But I haven't gotten over you yet, so it's a bit troubling for me."

Your teasing manner of saying it doesn't help, though.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Hehh, you really don't get flustered, huh? Maybe I just don't have that kind of appeal." Ichihashi seemed disappointed by my reaction.

"I admit that I don't really react in that kind of way, but I personally think you have more than enough appeal."

I really felt like I needed to make that clear. I don't want a friend to lose their self-confidence just because they misunderstood my reactions or lack thereof.

"Urk... I guess I set myself up for that one... You really are a Casanova..."

"I respectfully disagree." I shook my head in reply.

Ichihashi giggled before walking away with a "*Let's go?*". I didn't know whether the pinkish glow of her cheeks came from the cold or

her shyness. If it was the latter, then I guess it can't be helped since she was suddenly complimented by the guy she likes in an honest manner.

The two of us went on our way to have lunch. We kind of argued about who was paying, but I won in the end and treated her. After doing so, we went to the department store and talked to the employee from earlier.

"Do you want to split the cost and ownership, Ichihashi?" I asked.

"I see. So that was your plan, huh?" she grinned.

"Part of it. I can certainly afford this thing on my own, but I feel like it might be a waste if I was the only one using it."

Since this was a pretty heavy purchase, I wanted to maximize what I was getting out of it.

"I don't mind, but what would be our rotation?"

"Is a month good?"

"Sure~! I'll leave the moving to you."

"No problem," I replied.

The machine only weighed about 10.5 kilograms. Carrying it back and forth between our rooms shouldn't be much of a pain if I'm only doing it once every month.

In the end, we chose the Gemilai brand espresso machine. It'll be delivered to my room later in the evening. Having it every other month for only 35,000 points felt worth it. I've only heard good things about these espresso machines, so I inevitably felt excited.

I can't wait to brew my own espresso tonight.

"Do you like your coffee with milk, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Hmm, I can't say. I'm fine with either."

"So you're also fine with black coffee?"

"I'd drink it, but I'd be lying if I said I enjoyed it. Bitter stuff aren't my thing."

"Ehh, I think you'll like it once you get used to it."

"You might be right, but I don't trust myself to make good enough black coffee for a change of heart," I sighed.

Ichihashi nudged me with her elbow.

"Is that your way of asking me to brew one for you? How cute~."

"You know me too well."

"I've heard that before," she chuckled.

"What are you shopping for, by the way?" I asked, shifting the topic.

"Just some necessities and supplies for my room," she shrugged.

"Ah! While we're at it, why don't I teach you about buying good coffee beans?"

"I'll gladly accept that offer."

Ichihashi nudged me with her elbow once again.

"You planned on having me guide you from the start, didn't you~?"

"I can't deny that. I would've asked for your help if you didn't offer it."

Ichihashi grinned from ear to ear as she walked ahead of me.

"Oh, isn't that Ichinose-san?" she said, looking somewhere to the right.

In her casual outfit, Ichinose could be seen walking around with two of her female friends. (1)

"Seems like it," I replied.

"You're close friends with her, right? I've seen you hang out a lot with her during breaks."

"Hmm, I guess you could say that."

We were once fellow leaders who fostered friendship and teamwork over animosity. Oh, what a bond.

"Maybe she has a crush on you. Hee-hee, so many guys would go crazy if they knew that *the* Ichinose Honami is interested in someone."

"I don't think that's the case."

"It could totally be the case. And I haven't seen her interact that much with other boys, even among her classmates."

"Who knows? You can't really judge how close she is to someone unless you know her well."

Ichihashi stared at me with a deadpan expression.

"I guess you have a point. There's a chance that she's actually super close with some other guy but they only interact in secret," she sighed with a shrug. "Make him a random introvert with no friends, and make him an average guy with average looks and no self-confidence, too."

That's basically every modern rom-com light novel, or at least most of it. How interesting for Ichihashi to say that. It's too specific to be a coincidence.

"Do you read light novels, by any chance?"

Ichihashi smugly turned to me with a smirk.

"Ah~? How'd you know?"

"You sounded like someone who's fed up with every rom-com light novel having the same premise."

"That's because I am!" she pouted.

"I didn't expect that."

"Oh? Are you becoming more interested in me now?" she playfully covered her mouth with her hand. "Well, it was all Ijuuin-kun's fault..."

Flashback...

I can't stop thinking about it... I can't stop thinking about the end of this damned drama!

"Aghh! I hate it! Why did it end like that?!"

Not wanting to wait until I got back in the dorms, I decided to watch the final episode of the rom-com TV drama that I was watching right after class. After telling my friends to go ahead, I was practically the only person left in the classroom. My phone screen appeared brighter and brighter as the sun slowly set.

I watched it until the end... but I'm not satisfied! I feel betrayed!

I removed the earphones from my ears and sighed.

"Do you want to know what happened next?"

"Gyaaaaahhh-?!"

Someone suddenly spoke behind me so I shrieked on reflex.

"Ijuuin-kun?! What are you doing here, you almost gave me a heart attack!"

"I apologize for surprising you, Ichihashi-san. Though you almost gave me a heart attack, too-- on top of ear damage."

Ijuuin-kun sat behind me, so he was pretty close.

"S-Sorry... Wait, did you say something?"

"Yes. I asked if you wanted to know what happened next. You were watching the TV adaptation of *"Like Everyone Else"*, right?"

"Ehh, how'd you know?"

"You were muttering to yourself just now before it ended, and I heard the main characters' names."

"Ah..." I blushed in embarrassment. "A-Anyway, what did you mean by that? I want to know what happens next, but it was clearly the end."

"Are you familiar with manga and light novels, Ichihashi-san?"

"I've read some popular manga, but I haven't tried reading light novels."

There's One Piece or Meitantei Conan, for example.

"I understand. Well, you see, *"Like Everyone Else"* is actually based on a light novel of the same name. The ending of that last episode continues in the source material."

"Ohh, I've heard that anime is like that."

"Yes. And just like anime, a lot of modern dramas and series are actually adapted from light novels nowadays."

"That's interesting..." I held my chin and started pondering. "Hmm... I'm dying to know what happens next, but I don't know if I can read with only words."

I think there are illustrations for some parts of it, but I don't know if those are enough. It's not like I have a vivid imagination... or do I? I don't really know.

"There's no harm in trying, and it's totally fine if you don't like it. But the light novel ended recently, and fans went crazy about the ending-- the real ending." Ijuuin-kun nodded repeatedly while wearing a proud smile.

"T-The real ending... D-D-Did the main heroine end up with--"

"You'll have to find out for yourself."

"Uuuu-!"

"I can spoil you if you're okay with it, and you can also search for spoilers on the internet... But is that what you really want, Ichihashi-san?"

"Well... No..."

"Then, are you willing to experience *"Like Everyone Else"* in its purest form?"

"Yes..."

"Do you want to know who Misaki-chan ended up with?"

"Yes!"

"Do you want to know who Kaito ended up with?!"

"Yes!!"

"Do you want the most satisfying ending to the story?"

"Yes!!!"

"Fufu, then you're in luck, Ichihashi-san!"

"Eh?"

"I went back because I left a book under my desk, so our encounter was nothing but a mere coincidence. However, it's starting to feel like destiny!"

Ijuuin-kun opened up his bag and put two books on the table.

"These are the next two volumes from where the TV drama left off. To be honest, the adaptation was pretty decent, so I won't tell you to start from Volume 1."

"I see..."

"Of course, a lot of great details were still omitted, so you can still do that if you want."

"Okay..."

"I'll let you borrow those two for free, but if you want to read the rest, you'll have to pay me next time."

"Pay? H-How much...?"

"Fret not, Ichihashi-san. Borrowing from me will be the best decision of your life. Firstly, my prices are lower than rental services outside. You can look up the market prices online if you want. Secondly, you'll save a lot of space if you're not into stocking up books. And finally, I have a large catalog to choose from! You can even have me as a middleman if you want to acquire new releases."

"That's... impressive, I think."

"Yes, really. Of course, these are all hypotheticals. You can always return those books if you don't like the feel of reading."

Thanks to Sana, I feel like I've become less repulsed with the thought of reading. If I can bear with academic textbooks, then I can surely enjoy light novels.

"I understand. Thanks for this, Ijuuin-kun."

I took the books and tucked them neatly inside my bag.

"Not a problem," he replied with a satisfied smile.

"You're like a different person when you talk about light novels," I commented.

The way he spoke started to resemble Sotomura-kun.

"Haha, I get that a lot."

End of flashback...

"We got scolded by a patrolling teacher afterwards."

"That sounds like a totally normal encounter with Ijuuin..." I said.

"And so? How was it?"

"I got addicted..." Ichihashi trembled with her dead voice.

"Ah... My condolences..."

"I finished *"Like Everyone Else"* and wanted to chase that high, but while a lot of them had similar premises, their writings were downright horrendous... Especially the characters..."

"I know your suffering."

To be honest, I still wonder how some of those stories are published. I get that the market demands rom-com stories with wish-fulfillment settings yet relatable characters... but it's saturated with authors who can't even write a decent realistic main cast. How can the audience relate if all they read are overdone tropes and cringy dialogues?

"But yeah... I'm a regular customer now... The price is negligible so I can still provide for my other hobbies."

"Don't spend all of your private points now."

"No way! I may be into clothes, but I don't spend as much as the other girls. It's all about mixing and matching good pieces to make a great combination!"

I should probably ask her for advice next time. I think I can evaluate what looks good on me like any normal person would, but people with great fashion sense are on another level.

"Ah, speaking of Ijuuin-kun, he contacted a bunch of the girls yesterday, including me." Ichihashi looked from side to side to check if anyone could hear us. "I didn't know he had a bank set up for the class."

"Yeah, everyone who was already part of it also received the news. If I remember correctly, eight of you were included last

night."

"Yep. All of the girls in our class are in it now. Ijuuin-kun briefed us with Karuizawa-san's help, which was honestly a surprise. I remember her and the other girls making fun of him and Sotomura-kun during the first semester."

I don't think Karuizawa had a problem with either of them, to begin with. She probably made fun of them to show off and cement her position.

"Well, we're starting to mature as a class."

"Not all of us, though. Ijuuin-kun also explained why Ike-kun and his friends wouldn't be included in the bank."

Ichihashi didn't even mention Kouenji which reflected the kind of existence he'd become in our class.

"Ah, we're here!"

She excitedly entered the aisle where coffee beans are sold. I followed behind, curious to learn more about it.

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Ichihashi Ruri

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Female

Birthday: August 16th

Height: 167 cm (5'5")

Hair Color: Brown

Eye Color: Brown

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: C

Intelligence: B-

Decision-Making: C+

Physical Ability: C+

Cooperativeness: B-

Personality: Ichihashi was always seen as one of the mature girls in the class. She's been put in this category with the likes of Matsushita Chiaki, Nishimura Ryuuko, and Horikita Suzune. Her best friend, Azuma Sana, helps her with her studies, and they share the same interests in fashion. Ichihashi has a headstrong personality that made her seem domineering during her early days in school. However, her mature elegance shone through, making her well-liked by most girls in class. Given her past experiences of being teased by male classmates in the past, Ichihashi has a tendency to avoid boys. She only ever talks to

boys like Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Hirata Yousuke, or Kikuchi Kyou whom she knows aren't immature and childish. Ichihashi can be talkative if she wants to, but she's a bit shy when it comes to interacting with people from other classes.

Hobbies: Ichihashi is a fashionista, but she rarely engages with other people when she wants to go all out dressing up. That's why a rumor about a model walking alone around the mall started. This was especially a hot topic for the upperclassmen. That said, her outfit choices are still amazing even if she's with other people. Ichihashi is also known for being an expert in coffee. She also dislikes canned coffee from vending machines. And despite coffee being her favorite beverage, she's careful not to drink it too much. She'd also become an avid light novel reader thanks to her love for romantic comedies.

Abilities: Ichihashi's academic prowess is average, but it has been steadily improving thanks to Azuma's guidance. Her physical abilities are only a little above average, but she's actually already more athletic than most girls in the class. In terms of decision-making, Ichihashi can be easily overwhelmed by emotions when it comes to danger, but she is able to hide it well.

Gallery:

(Volume 4: Chapter 1.1 - Prelude of a New Game)

Author's Notes:

Ichihashi Ruri tentative illust by **kagachi_SK** (on Twitter).

1. Ichinose was helping her friends shop for gifts. It's Kanzaki's birthday the next day.

I promise everything about this is important to the plot. It's not just me ranting about shitty rom-com light novels and web novels.

Vol. 6: Chapter 11.1 - Before the Glass Shatters

On the Sunday night, before the Paper Shuffle Exam, I felt the cool breeze brush past my skin as I walked my way back to the school dormitory. The icy sensation of the cold pierced the tip of my nose. It makes you wonder if it'll snow this year.

For now, I should get inside the building. It'll become a pain if I suddenly catch the flu.

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Oh, Horikita. Good evening."

I entered the dorm lobby and saw her sitting on one of the couches. She loosely wore her brown cardigan so I could clearly see the white camisole underneath. As a guy, I can't say I don't appreciate the view. At the end of the day, Horikita was a very attractive girl.

"Where did you go?" she asked, starting the conversation.

I took my seat on the other end of the couch.

"I just got back from the convenience store. How about you? What are you doing here?"

"I... just needed a change in environment. I didn't feel comfortable in my room."

"I see..." That reason was unusual for someone like Horikita. "Is everything alright?"

"To be honest, I can't be too sure. The issue with Yamauchi-kun and Ryuen-kun had a very troublesome development... And there's the exam tomorrow, too."

"How's the class's performance?" I asked.

"Based on the mock exam, our class's performance was amazing. The questions were harder than our regular exams, but we managed to pull through and increase the class average."

That should've been good news but... seeing Horikita's aloof expression, I could tell that it wasn't much of a good news.

"It's not enough, is it?"

"Unfortunately..." she shook her head. "If we don't count the midterm exam during the first semester, we've actually hit our all-time high in terms of class average, which is 77.43 points. Every pair was well above 1,000 points, too. It's a stellar result but..."

"77.43 points... That's actually very high. But it can't compare to Sakayanagi or Ichinose's class. I can still remember that their classes' average scores were at least 82 points during the first semester's final exam."

I don't know how they did during the last midterms, though. (1)

"Yes... It'll be a huge gap in the total score. Even if their results are worse this time, the chances of them beating us are still extremely high..."

With an average score of 77.43 points, the class would either have 24,776 or 24,778 points in total for their overall score. Even if an opposing class's average score is only ahead of us by two or three points, the gap in overall score would still be a significant number. (2)

To put things into perspective, a class getting an average score of 80 points would have at least 25,600 points in total. That's a difference of more than 800 points.

If we're going to trust the data, then this exam is already over before it even started. We'd lose 100 class points if Class B and Class C beat us...

"I assume you didn't tell the class?"

"That's right. It would only dampen their morale. They must take the exam at peak condition no matter what."

I also think that's for the best. Even if we lose this time, the thing that matters the most is the steady improvement of the class.

"Have you given up on trying to get a higher score than Sakayanagi and Ichinose's classes?" I asked.

Horikita stayed silent for a short second before answering.

"Yes... I don't see any point in trying any other method at this stage. This kind of exam favors the class with the most number of academically gifted students. Unfortunately, we're not in that class. It's the same with Ryuen-kun. He tried to use a traitor like Miyamoto-kun to sabotage us, and he failed. If everything else continues normally, Class D would have a harder time winning than us."

Getting paired with Ryuen's class was our only way out, but unfortunately, we weren't so lucky.

"Speaking of Miyamoto, he talked to me yesterday."

"He did?" Horikita's tone turned urgent.

"Oh, he hadn't told you yet? Well, I guess he was supposed to keep it a secret. But yeah, he apologized for yelling at me and grabbing me. He said he only did it on Ryuen's orders."

Her eyes narrowed as she turned her gaze away from me.

"But why would Ryuen-kun give him such an order...? I don't understand..."

"I don't know either."

I stared at Horikita while she desperately tried to think.

"Speaking of which, we've received news from Miyamoto-kun that he failed in trying to use the bug against Ryuen-kun. That was probably the reason why Ryuen-kun was on guard against me and Hirata-kun when we tried to use it ourselves..." Horikita explained. "He didn't mention it to you?"

"No, not really."

If I remember correctly, Miyamoto used one when he gave the decoy questions to Ryuen. And the other bug was borrowed by Horikita.

"Well, I guess that makes sense," she replied. "You see, Miyamoto-kun repeatedly apologized for delaying the news. He said he didn't know how he'd tell us about his failure. And he was afraid that you'd get angry at him for losing your bug. He begged us to keep it a secret from you, but I think you should still know. I'm sorry, we got your property taken away. I'll take responsibility for his mistake... though I don't think you're the type of person to hold that against him, anyway."

So Ryuen found the bug and took it away from him, huh?

"I won't resent him over that. It's not much of a loss, to begin with."

"I see..." Horikita's expression dimmed. "But now that Ryuen-kun knows about the bugs, I'm afraid he'd try to stock up on them..."

"He can't. He probably managed to buy one, but that's it. If I count the one he got from Miyamoto, he'd only have two bugs in total."

"How...?"

"It's out of stock. And they won't restock it ever again."

"Is that so...? I see... I guess, that's a relief. How many did they have left when you bought yours?"

"Apparently, they only had five in stock. I tried to buy the three remaining ones before summer vacation, but the employee told me that a class couldn't possess more than two of them. I only found out about it when I returned to buy more. And by the time I got there, only one bug was left, so Ryuen might've bought that one."

According to the employee, a second-year student bought two of the three remaining bugs.

"A class...? Not student?"

"Yeah. It seems like the school deliberately put those bugs in the shop and made some restrictions."

"How absurd..." Horikita sighed.

She leaned back and tried to relax, but she didn't stop thinking.

I should probably return to my room now. I wanna put the things

I bought inside the fridge.

"Can I ask you something, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Oh, sure," I replied.

"Sakayanagi-san and Katsuragi-kun looked for you on Wednesday, right? What did you talk about?" she asked.

"Hmm... The talk between me and Sakayanagi was a bit personal."

"So it wasn't related to the Paper Shuffle at all?"

"No, not really."

Not on the surface, at least.

"If that's the case, then I won't pry. What about Katsuragi-kun?"

"With Katsuragi... He asked how I would win this exam if I was the current leader."

Horikita's method of ameliorating the class as a whole was known to our opponents. And Katsuragi, in particular, didn't believe that we would improve in time for the Paper Shuffle.

After hearing the results of the mock test earlier, it seems like Katsuragi was right.

In other words, his question indirectly criticized Horikita as our current leader.

"I see..." She didn't seem to have dwelled on it, which was admirable. "What did you tell him?"

"I said I'd do the same thing you did. In this type of exam, there's not much strategizing to do unless you want to be like Ryuen. Your approach will probably benefit the class in the long run, which is honestly better, in my opinion."

"Is that so...? Um... Thank you..."

For the first time, I saw Horikita blush in shyness.

I thought I'd give her a genuine compliment as a friend.

"I'm glad to hear that from you..." she smiled.

If Horikita wasn't as strong as she was, her confidence would've been crushed long ago. But she kept moving forward and tried to prove herself as a worthy leader along with Hirata.

"I know I said that you're still behind the others, but you're a good leader. And from here on out, you'll only get better."

Horikita needed reassurance, and I'm probably the only one who can give that to her as someone who was once in her position.

That said...

She might not be able to smile for a while after today...

Author's Notes:

1. Since Kiyotaka was no longer part of the leader squad, he didn't bother analyzing the results of the midterm exams during the second semester. That's why he only remembers the one before it.

2. An overall score of 24,777 or 24,779 points is also equal to an overall average score of 77.43 points, but each item is worth 2 points in the Paper Shuffle Exam, so the overall score can't be an odd number.

2.1. The canon stating that Sakayanagi's class won against Ichinose's class by 2 points meant that it was also just a difference by one student getting one more question right.

You can check Volume 1: Chapter 17.2 of Self-Test for reference. I updated the picture there so it shows the class average for each subject.

RIP for the comments though.

According to Volume 1, each individual class has its own passing grade due to the difference in class averages.

Later on, it was shown to be one step further than that since Suzune only lowered her English score to lower the class average for the English subject.

This means each class will have different passing grades for each individual subject. It was never refuted by Kiyotaka or Chabashira-sensei so we can take it as fact.

We can somewhat see that this rule was still followed until Volume 6, and it was stated to have been unchanged since the first one.

However, this is a bit of a confusing plot point. If their per-subject passing grade stayed consistently at 40 points, then it means they'd consistently scored as high as they did when they used the old test questions from the seniors. This doesn't make sense given how that strategy made their first midterm exam a lot easier. Logically, their class average and passing grade should've dropped in the following exams, but they did not.

I can only think of one rationalization for this:

The first-semester midterm exam might be what decides the passing grades for the rest of the year. However, this was never brought up as a plot point ever again. Even if Kiyotaka addressed the lack of change in Volume 6, he never thought it was strange, passing it off as a normal thing.

There's also the possibility that Kinu just forgot about it.

Also, Kiyotaka's strategy in Volume 1 was fundamentally flawed. Because he shared it with the whole class, it was inevitable for the class average to rise, making the passing grade higher, too. If he really wanted

to prevent the failures from getting expelled, he'd only share the old test questions with them to keep the class average and passing grade as low as possible. But I gotta cut him some slack. It's not like he knew how the passing grade was calculated at that time.

Vol. 6: Chapter 12.1 - The Last of a Whole

December 6th, Monday... It was the day of the Paper Shuffle Exam-- our final exam for the second semester. The questions we've made were to be answered by Ichinose's Class C and our class will be answering the questions made by Sakayanagi's Class B.

The first day has finally come. There were four subjects for today: Social Studies, English, Japanese, and Mathematics.

I arrived early and put my bag in place. Being the first person in the classroom, I had no one to talk to. But my lonesome state didn't last long. Horikita arrived and elegantly walked to her chair.

"Good morning," I greeted.

"Good morning," she replied.

Before Horikita could continue, an unlikely group opened the sliding door.

"Oh, it's just Horikita-chan and Ayanokouji."

"We sure got here early!"

"I wanna finish this exam already. I'm so tired..."

"Yeah, I wanna sleep, too."

Ike and his friends made their appearance and sat down.

"Are you guys ready for the exam?" Horikita asked.

"I've never been more ready in my life!" answered Ike.

"I'll get those high scores and finally see my name on top!" followed Yamauchi.

"Don't get too carried away, you two. Dragging down your partners is already embarrassing enough, you know?" Hondou took out his notes with a sigh.

"The hell did you, say Ryoutarou?!"

"Oh, c'mon, just shut up. We've done our last-ditch review together. There's no way we can fail this!" Miyamoto pumped himself up with a cheery voice.

Horikita shook her head in dismay while giving Miyamoto a strange look.

"Well, they got decent results in the mock test, so I guess I'll leave them be..." she said.

"As long as Class B didn't make questions that were harder than the ones we did, I think they'll be fine."

Hirata arrived as I gave my comment. After he greeted us, Matsushita and Satou followed suit. It didn't take long before the

classroom was filled with students. Some formed groups while some didn't. But they all have one thing in common. Their review materials were all taken out as they continued studying before the test.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun." Karuizawa called out to me.

"Good morning, Karuizawa."

"Good morning..." She looked meek and a bit pouty, and I can guess why. "You're ready for the exam, right?"

"What makes you think otherwise?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?! You were so mean last night! Like, you really scared me, you know?"

"I was just kidding."

"Well, I've probably roasted you about this a thousand times already, but none of your jokes will land with that kind of tone!"

Karuizawa can really hit right where it hurts. She's almost on par with Horikita when it comes to burning people with words.

"You should've been used to me by now, Karuizawa."

"I am, but still!"

Even with how loud our conversation was becoming, none of our classmates really paid attention to us. Hirata was Karuizawa's boyfriend, but everyone also recognized how close we were as friends.

That said, we haven't really talked like this since the Zodiac Exam. I'm glad we've made things clear to each other last night.

"Alright, alright, my bad," I said. "I actually asked Horikita about our paired results during the mock exam."

"Really, really? What did she say?" she asked excitedly.

"We got a total of 1,258 points. I think it's pretty solid."

"Wow! What's the required score again?"

"Hmm... Wasn't it 692? points?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's it! That's amazing. We're totally safe!" Karuizawa's muffled claps looked very endearing.

"Don't get too excited now. Class B might give us even harder questions."

"Ahh mou, stop scaring me!" Karuizawa slapped my arm. "And besides, the questions you guys made were brutal enough! Anything harder than those shouldn't be accepted by the school!"

"I guess you're right... Well, you don't have to be so nervous about me. You should worry about yourself more. In truth, I got a respectable score of more than 700 points."

... which meant that I scored around 150 points more than her.

"You made the questions, though..." she pouted, giving me a dubious look.

"I only made ten for each subject. There were five of us working

together, you know...?"

"Hmmp... Well, whatever! Good luck to us! As... p-partners!"

"Yeah, good luck."

Karuizawa grabbed my hand and shook it wildly. She then turned around and quickly walked back to her group. **(1)**

Why did she shake my hand like that? What a strange person.

"Good morning!" Kikyou energetically opened the door as she arrived inside the classroom.

After greeting everyone inside, she left her bag and approached me.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun~!" As usual, her smile was brighter than the morning sun.

"Good morning, Kiky-"

"Good~. Mor~. Ning~!" she repeated.

This smile... I've seen it before.

"Yeah... Good morning..."

For some reason, the feeling of déjà vu and a wave of goosebumps hit me at the same time.

"Let's go!" She turned around and walked her way out of the door. "I'll get a drink from the vending machine, so come with me."

Akito came up behind me and whispered.

"Dude... Kushida was actually watching you and Karuizawa behind the door earlier. She didn't open it until you guys were done talking."

"Oh... Really...?"

"Yeah... Her eyes were really scary..."

"I see... Uh, thanks for telling me..."

"Sure, man. Good luck..." He patted me on the shoulders before giving me a light push.

I followed Kikyou out of the classroom, and we stopped by the vending machine near one of the staircases.

"What are you getting?" I asked.

"Hmm... I'm not thirsty."

So that was a lie... Well, I kind of figured that out already.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun-?"

I took Kikyou's hand and made a turn.

This secluded end of the hallway was adjacent to the staircase at the edge of the building. It wasn't practical for anyone other than the people coming out of the classrooms near it. However, said classrooms were currently vacant.

And so, the two of us were finally isolated.

Kikyou stared at me in anticipation. I gently placed my hand on her shoulders and pulled her close for an embrace.

She didn't say a word. I felt her arm wrap around my body, and

her hands touch my back.

"Did you calm down?" I asked.

"Mn..."

After almost a minute of hugging, Kikyou softly pushed herself away from me. As our bodies separated, Kikyou held one of my hands.

"Were you feeling jealous of Karuizawa?"

"Mn..."

"Because you like me?"

She shook her head from side to side.

"Because you're my best friend?"

"Mn..."

Her actions were calculated, but they were also genuine. Right now, even if it seemed fake, it was the real Kikyou that was in front of me. She wasn't acting, nor was she pretending.

This is what happens when the phony Kikyou and authentic Kikyou collide. It's a side that only I am able to see.

"Say, Kikyou. When all of this is over, I'll spoil you a lot, okay?"

She pulled herself closer and looked up at me with upturned eyes.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Okay..."

Kikyou's mind was in turmoil because of Ryuen, but she chose to stay silent. Of course, it wasn't because she didn't want to confide in me anymore.

"For now, though, things will get a little bit chaotic."

"Eh...?"

With a mixture of confusion and anxiety, Kikyou tightened her grip on my hand.

"So I want you to hold on for a bit," I said.

"What do you mean... Kiyotaka-kun?" she meekly asked.

I tenderly pat Kikyou's head, assuring her that she wasn't in any danger.

"You'll see soon."

After a little while, the two of us returned to the classroom. I saw Keisei teaching our friends along with Ijuuin and Professor. The same goes for the other tutors with their students. Everyone studied until the very end, and before long, the first bell finally rang.

Al. Convenient.

1. Like so.

Vol. 6: Chapter 13.1 - Collateral Damage

As the bell chimed to signal the beginning of the test, everyone started to pack up their study materials. We had to store any and all objects that were unnecessary for the exam in the lockers at the back of the classroom. The only things we were allowed to have were writing utensils. If our pencils broke, ran out of lead, or used up our erasers, we had to request additional supplies from Chabashira-sensei.

"We will now start your final exam. Your first test subject is contemporary Japanese. You are forbidden from turning your papers over before I give the signal to begin," Chabashira-sensei explained.

Rather than have the students at the front of each row pass the test papers back, Chabashira-sensei placed the papers on each student's desk herself.

"The exam will be fifty minutes long. Please try to avoid leaving or using the restroom. In the event that you aren't able to wait, please raise your hand and let me know. You won't be allowed to leave the room during the exam for any other reason," she continued.

Chabashira-sensei finished handing out test papers. Not a single student was talking by this point. Everyone focused on their papers. Shortly afterward, the next bell rang, signaling the official start of the exam.

"Begin"

However, before Chabashira-sensei could finish giving her signal, a knock came from the outside. The sliding door opened, and everyone saw that it was Sakagami-sensei.

"Sakagami-sensei, you were supposed to oversee the examination for Class 1-D. Is there a problem?" Chabashira-sensei asked, looking puzzled.

"Forgive me for the sudden interruption. I have requested another teacher to be the proctor for my class, so please do not worry. You see, I came here because I have received a report. Allegedly, one of your students plans to cheat on the exam."

His words instantly caused an uproar.

"What the heck?!"

"Huh-?!"

"Cheat?!"

"Who?!"

Hirata, Kikyuu, Horikita-- everyone looked confused. Chabashira-sensei wasn't an exception.

"Would you like to elaborate on that, Sakagami-sensei?" she narrowed her eyes into a glare.

Sakagami-sensei was unfazed. He fixed his glasses and continued without wasting a breath.

"The sender of this report wanted to stay anonymous for obvious reasons. However, they've told me that if they were wrong, I could reveal their name and that they would make a public apology to appease the accused."

"I see. Well then, who is the student in question?"

"It's Miyamoto Soshi-kun of Class 1-A."

The clamor picked up once more. Everyone turned their eyes to Miyamoto who went pale after hearing his name.

"W-What the-?! Why am I the one who got accused? I-I-I never planned on cheating, and I never will!" he exclaimed.

"That's right!" yelled Ike.

"Soshi wouldn't need to cheat on this exam!" followed Hondou.

"We studied together all night for this! There's no way Soshi would cheat!" added Yamauchi.

Hirata raised his hand, but he didn't wait to get called before laying his thoughts out.

"Sakagami-sensei... Miyamoto-kun is part of my study group. I can vouch for his innocence as someone who'd watched over his studies before this test. He's become a very diligent student who genuinely tries to improve."

His steadfast yet gentle explanation managed to calm everyone down.

"Sakagami-sensei," called Chabashira-sensei. "As you can see, none of my other students believe that Miyamoto-kun would ever commit such an act. The sender must've been mistaken."

"Well, I wouldn't have come here if the accusation was baseless, would I?" he sighed.

"Are you saying that there's evidence? We haven't even started the exam yet..."

"If it's about evidence, you can investigate it yourself. According to the sender, since students wouldn't have any other belongings around them, Miyamoto-kun would most likely resort to using cheat sheets-- Wait a minute!" Sakagami-sensei quickly turned to Miyamoto who was about to check his blazer. "Please don't make any unnecessary moves, Miyamoto-kun. Once you're proven innocent after this whole ordeal, I'll personally give you an apology,

as well. So for now, if possible, I would like to have your cooperation in this investigation."

Miyamoto nervously withdrew his hands away from his clothes.

"Do you mind checking him yourself, Chabashira-sensei? It would be quite disingenuous if I'm the one to do it, after all."

She turned to Miyamoto with a concerned face.

"Fine! Go ahead, Sensei... I have nothing to hide." Miyamoto raised his arms without any hesitation.

Chabashira-sensei approached him and slowly started to check his pockets.

The classroom was filled with deathly silence. Everyone felt nervous even though they weren't the ones being checked. And finally...

"Miyamoto... What... is this...?" Chabashira-sensei's composure took a hit after taking a small piece of paper inside Miyamoto's blazer.

Miyamoto couldn't believe his own eyes.

"W-What...? That's-- I don't know! I-I don't know what that is!"

"These... are answers for the test," Chabashira-sensei uttered as she read the contents of the paper.

"I see... So it's the truth, after all." Sakagami-sensei's gaze became distant.

It didn't seem like he was joyful about this development either.

"I-I don't know how that paper got there, I promise!"

Chabashira-sensei started to retrieve more papers from the inner pockets of Miyamoto's blazer. At that point, everything started to become clear. Our classmates knew what this entailed, and so did the teachers.

"Did the sender accuse anyone else?" Chabashira-sensei asked with a heavy tone.

"No, they didn't. But since we've discovered some substantial evidence against Miyamoto-kun, we'll have to follow the proper protocol established by the school and conduct a brief check on everyone's belongings right after today's exam."

"Please wait!"

Finally, the person that everyone hoped to hear finally raised her voice.

"I still think Miyamoto-kun is innocent. He must've been framed," she said.

"Why would you think so?" Before Sakagami-sensei could respond, Chabashira-sensei gave Horikita the chance to explain herself.

Horikita bit her lip in frustration. She was probably ready to explain what she knew, but it would severely complicate the entire

thing. If she reveals to everyone that Miyamoto has been cooperating with Ryuuen, his credibility will take a nosedive. Even if they accuse him of coercing Miyamoto, Ryuuen had probably already deleted all usable evidence. It could very much worsen Miyamoto's situation instead.

She needs time to make a suitable defense for him. The suddenness, pressure, and gravity of the situation do not help either.

"A person from another class might be the one behind this. It makes sense for them to try and sabotage us," she said.

In the end, Horikita could only give them a vague answer.

"We're taking that possibility into account, Horikita-kun. Cheating is an extremely grave offense, so we'll continue thoroughly investigating this matter and give Miyamoto-kun the chance to properly explain himself. I'll see to it that the school won't make a rash decision," Sakagami-sensei replied.

"Listen up, Class A." Chabashira-sensei turned to us to make an announcement. "As per the school's rules, you will continue taking the exam. I've called in another teacher to act as your temporary proctor, so please stay put as you wait."

She then collected the test papers which were still upside down.

Our classmates followed her instructions, but they were inevitably shaken by the entire thing. Horikita couldn't help but quietly clench her fists. She was in deep thought, probably trying to piece everything together once and for all.

"Miyamoto, come with us to the teachers' faculty."

"S-Sensei... I..."

"It'll be fine. If you're really innocent, then the truth will come to light soon."

The proctor arrived soon enough. Chabashira-sensei and Sakagami-sensei were then accompanied by Miyamoto to move the investigation forward.

"..."

Silence dominated the room, and the voice of the substitute teacher was the only thing that everyone remembered before the exam ended.

During the break, Horikita immediately walked to the front of the class and encouraged everyone to listen. Of course, none of our classmates even thought about leaving the classroom to take a break. Everyone was curious about what just happened, and all of them wanted answers.

"Horikita-chan! Soshi is innocent, right?!" yelled Yamauchi. "He won't be in danger, right?!"

"Please calm down," said Horikita. "We can all band together to plead for Miyamoto-kun's innocence, but the school simply can't accept that. Right now, the odds are stacked against us. Cheat sheets have been found on Miyamoto-kun's clothes. It would've been easy if Sakagami-sensei was the one who checked him but..."

"Yeah, what's up with Sakagami-sensei?! He must've been colluding with whoever set Soshi up!" Ike declared.

"I... don't think Sakagami-sensei had any ill intent..." Makida raised his hand, much to everyone's surprise. "I believe he's a good teacher. Obviously, he cares about his class more, but that doesn't mean he'd maliciously try to harm any student."

"Hah-? Are you-"

"Stop it, Kanji. We're not trying to pick fights right now. This is about saving Soshi, remember?" Hondou stopped Ike before he could argue with Makida.

"I also think that Sakagami-sensei is a righteous teacher," said Hirata. "So, the person we must put our interest in is the one who sent the report."

Everyone grumbled. This person might very well be the mastermind behind all of this.

"But they insisted on keeping their identity anonymous, right? Since their claim turned out to be true, Sakagami-sensei is obliged to keep it that way."

He probably can't keep his identity hidden from higher authorities if the investigation ever reaches a certain phase, but he could make a request to stay anonymous from everyone else.

"Yeah, yeah! Who the heck would even make that report?!"

"They must've been the one who put those cheat sheets on Miyamoto in the first place!"

"It's Ryuen, I tell you!" Yamauchi claimed.

Ken looked inclined to believe that Ryuen was behind all of this, and the same could be said for most of our classmates.

"Are you an idiot? We answered questions made by Class B. So it must've been them who are out to get him!" argued Ike.

"What if they're working together? It's definitely possible after what just happened during the sports festival, right?" added Hondou.

"But that begs the question," Akito butted in. "How the heck did they put those cheat sheets on him in the first place?"

"The answer to Miyake-kun's question will be the most crucial piece to prove his innocence," said Horikita.

"But we can't just answer it, right? Like, Miyamoto-kun is the only one who could explain that to them."

"I hope Soshi-kun gives them a suitable reason..." said Kikyuu.

"Who were the last potential suspects that were in contact with Soshi-kun before this..." asked Ryuuko.

Hondou looked at Horikita with a serious expression. She thought for a moment before finally nodding at him. It seems like they've decided to tell everyone the truth.

"Actually, Soshi was hiding something from all of us."

Everyone suddenly turned their heads to Hondou.

"He told me a few days after the Paper Shuffle was announced... that Ryuuen was threatening him," he said.

"What-?!"

"Ryuuen?!"

"I knew it was him!"

"I'll explain," Horikita interjected. "We've actually been working with Hondou-kun and Miyamoto-kun regarding this matter. The goal of the enemy was to seemingly get a hold of our test questions just like how they did with our participation table."

"It was the underlying reason for the mock test we had. Us question makers along with Horikita-san and Hirata-kun made a new set of test questions to serve as decoys," explained Matsushita.

Everyone gasped in awe. They didn't think Horikita and the others implemented such measures.

However, she and Hirata wore dark expressions. They were hesitating on whether they should continue spelling out the truth, especially the one that only they knew.

Before they could decide that, though. The bell rang to signal the end of our break. We took the exam, finishing the last two subjects for the day. Everyone must've tried their best to focus on the test despite the chaos.

After the proctor collected our test papers, Chabashira-sensei finally returned. However, Miyamoto wasn't with him.

"Sae-chan-sensei! Where's Soshi?!"

The class held their breath as they waited for an answer. All of them trembled nervously, especially after seeing the expression on Chabashira-sensei's face.

"Miyamoto failed to give an alibi that would explain the cheat sheets in his uniform and the cheat sheets we discovered in his belongings later on. We've also found additional evidence supporting the claim that he planned on cheating."

"But Sensei, we might actually prove Soshi's innocence with-"

"Are you talking about his cooperative relationship with Ryuuen? Miyamoto had already told us about it."

"And... it didn't help him?"

"No... In fact, the contract he signed with Ryuuen was the

additional evidence that I've just mentioned."

"Contract...?" muttered Hondou.

Apparently, he didn't know about it.

Class A couldn't believe what they were hearing. The last bit of hope they had crumbled away like dust.

"Miyamoto will be expelled... And because he's partnered up with Mori, she will be expelled as well."

Miyamoto's expulsion would cost 300 class points. Mori's expulsion would make it 600. And since our loss on the Paper Shuffle Exam is pretty much guaranteed, we would lose an additional 100 class points.

That's 700 class points in total. Not bad, Sakayanagi.

Vol. 6: Chapter 13.2 - Name

"N-No way... Nene-chan..." Kikyou was the first to voice her reaction right after Chabashira-sensei's announcement.

Everyone gazed down in frustration.

Mori will be expelled along with Miyamoto. Everyone thought about that ever since he was accused as a cheater. However, no one spoke up or brought it up, even Mori herself. It was the inevitable truth that everyone deliberately tried to ignore earlier. However, it was finally time for them to face reality.

"This is stupid! Miyamoto is innocent, right?! This is all Ryuen's fault for threatening him!" shouted Ken.

The students of Class A rallied around Ken's words, saying that these punishments were clearly unjustified.

"I see. It seems like we're not on the same page just yet." Chabashira-sensei turned to Horikita and Hirata. "You still haven't told them?"

Our classmates were confused. Apparently, there's been a misunderstanding.

"Ryuen wasn't threatening Miyamoto at all. No blackmailing was happening behind all of this. Miyamoto was willingly working with Ryuen ever since they signed a contract."

Obviously, this shocked everyone in the classroom. Regardless, Chabashira-sensei continued explaining.

"The details of a contract are normally concealed from the public, but both parties have consented to its disclosure for Class A. Ryuen said that he wanted you to know about it so he can clear his name, while Miyamoto thought that it didn't matter anymore whether its kept secret or not."

Based on her words, it seems like Miyamoto has completely lost hope.

"According to the contract, Miyamoto will be following Ryuen's orders until graduation. The contract will be disclosed to the public should he disobey an order. In exchange, Ryuen promised to pay him private points, and will keep paying him until the contract is no longer valid."

"What the hell...?"

"He was a spy...?"

"Miyamoto was getting points... from Ryuen?"

Such absurdity only made everyone's thoughts even more muddled.

"So all that crap that I did with Horikita-san and Hirata to help him... was for nothing...?" asked Hondou.

Ike and Yamauchi were speechless, too.

"I'll spare you specifics of their conditions regarding when and how much Ryuen will pay. However, I can, at least, tell you that he was required to make a down payment of 3 million private points right after the signing."

"Seriously...?"

"That's so much..."

"Is that why he betrayed us...?"

"It's true. I looked through his phone myself last Saturday, and he had more than 3 million points in his account. I suspected him to be an actual traitor since then," Karuizawa chimed in, supporting Chabashira-sensei's explanation.

"So Miyamoto-kun is a traitor, and that made him more suspicious... But what about the cheating itself, Sensei?" asked Ichihashi.

"Yeah, what's that got to do with him cheating? I don't see the connection," followed Minami (Setsuya).

"Both of them claimed to have no idea about the cheating, but one of the clauses of their contract stated that: In the event that one of the signees is expelled, their private points would be transferred to the other signee. This was seen as a potential motive for Ryuen to expel Miyamoto, so we investigated his belongings. However, we didn't find any evidence that he was connected to the cheat sheets. In the end, we've concluded that Miyamoto was responsible for the cheat sheets himself," Chabashira-sensei answered.

That clause works for both of them. And Ryuen could always argue that it's just a security measure since he was working with a traitor from another class.

"I have four questions, Sensei." Horikita raised her hand and asked in chorus.

Finally, the class felt some hope.

"Just so you know, I'm only allowed to reveal certain details of the investigation. There are questions that I will be unable to answer. Other than that, go ahead."

"I understand," nodded Horikita. "Then, firstly, what was Miyamoto-kun's motive? If their contract works as expected, then he wouldn't need to perform so well in this exam that he needed to cheat. And we've conducted a mock test last week. Miyamoto-kun's results were more than enough to pass the actual exam."

"The investigation states that his motivations are still currently

unknown."

"I see... Then, were there any interactions between Miyamoto-kun and Class B? Since the test questions were made by Class B, Miyamoto-kun wouldn't be able to make those cheat sheets if he didn't make contact with them."

"According to the investigation, none of the Class B students were in close contact with Miyamoto."

"None, huh...?" she muttered. "Why would the sender contact Sakagami-sensei instead of you?"

"Unfortunately, I don't know."

"Is that so...?" Horikita's brows furrowed in suspicion. "Then, for my last question, who reported the cheating to Sakagami-sensei?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't disclose the name yet." Chabashira-sensei shook her head.

"What's going on, Sensei?! Horikita's questions weren't really answered!"

"The investigation is still lacking!"

"Miyamoto might be a traitor, but he probably didn't plan to cheat!"

"The school can't just expel him without finding the truth!"

Horikita's barrage of questions blew holes in the school's so-called 'investigation'. The class instantly latched on to that.

"I know how you feel," Chabashira-sensei looked straight at us with a serious expression. "But can you explain how Miyamoto ended up with cheat sheets in his uniform?"

Everyone turned silent. At the end of the day, Miyamoto was caught red-handed. Unless they could disprove that he did it *and* prove that someone else did, then the school would still sanction him with the necessary punishment.

"I don't have an explanation, but I have a theory." Horikita declared.

"Alright, Horikita. Let's hear it."

"The person who reported the matter to Sakagami-sensei is the one behind all of this. This person is capable of both acquiring the answers for Class B's test questions and putting the cheat sheet inside Miyamoto-kun's uniform without him knowing," she explained.

"That's quite the suspect," Chabashira-sensei commented.

"At the same time, this person specifically contacted Sakagami-sensei to initially hide their identity from Chabashira-sensei. I think there were two reasons for this, and they are linked to each other... Firstly, they didn't trust Chabashira-sensei to keep their identity hidden from the class during the accusation. And secondly, it's because they're a member of Class A."

As Horikita finished laying down her theory, the class's murmurs erupted into a clamor.

"Someone from the class did this...?"

"But why?"

"Did somebody want to expel Miyamoto-kun?"

They felt like Horikita's words made sense.

"Well said, Horikita. However, unless you can provide hard proof to support your theory, the school probably won't accept it."

"I am aware, Sensei. But if I had the sender's name-"

Before Horikita could finish her sentence, a knock was heard from the door. Sakagami-sensei had arrived.

"Sakagami-sensei, please tell us the identity of the sender!" pleaded Yamauchi.

"He might have betrayed us, but we need to prove Soshi's innocence!" followed Hondou.

"Is it true that the sender is a member of our class?" asked Ike.

Fixing his glasses in place, Sakagami-sensei nodded.

"I see that you've done some explaining, Chabashira-sensei. As Miyamoto-kun and Mori-kun's classmates, it's their right to know about it, at least to a certain degree."

"Exactly. That aside, what brings you here, Sakagami-sensei?" she asked.

"Well, before that, I would like to elucidate the matter regarding the sender's identity..."

The class stared at him in anticipation. They were eager to know who the mystery sender was.

"There were two reasons why we're keeping his name a secret. Firstly, it was the sender's request in exchange for giving the information. However, that's just a small part of it. The second reason is even more important."

"And that is...?"

"Regarding their identity, we do not know if they are telling the truth," Sakagami-sensei answered with a sigh.

Everyone started mumbling to each other once again. The situation has become even more complicated.

"What do you mean, Sakagami-sensei?" asked Hirata.

"I never fully believed that the sender sent their true name. That's also the reason why I didn't disclose it."

"Is there a reason why you didn't really believe it, Sensei?" Horikita raised a hand.

"Oh? You seem to have something in mind, Horikita-kun."

"Yes," she nodded. "They must've sent you the report using a fake email account. If they really intended to make themselves known to you, they would've used the email account that the school provided

for us or a text message where their phone number could be seen."

"Excellent. It is as you said," he replied. "I overheard your theory earlier, and if that is proven true, then Miyamoto-kun will be judged as innocent. However, without evidence, so many possible theories pointing to Miyamoto-kun's guilt can also be made."

Sakagami-sensei was right. Horikita's theory is just one of many narratives that can be formed using the information we currently have.

"Now then, let me tell you the reason why I'm here." Sakagami-sensei stepped inside the classroom and faced us. "If possible, I would also like to get to the bottom of this. We've investigated Miyamoto-kun and Ryuen-kun, and we've also given the students of Class B some brief questioning. However, we cannot find the truth. The only hard evidence that we have is Miyamoto-kun being in possession of cheat sheets. That's why the current truth is him being guilty. I have convinced the school to finalize Miyamoto-kun's judgment tomorrow, so we only have until today to finish the investigation."

After listening to his words, the class realized that Sakagami-sensei was on our side. Even Chabashira-sensei looked relieved after hearing this news.

"But what else can you do, Sensei?" asked Ken.

"We still have one lead left-- the name that the sender had sent as their identity."

"Are you going to let the students know who it is?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"That's right. At first, I didn't want to involve the bearer of the name, but at this point, your students will be in danger."

Sakagami-sensei turned towards a specific part of the room. Everyone followed his gaze as he addressed a certain student.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun, may I ask you a few questions regarding this matter?"

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"I'll be staying here while Sakagami-sensei questions Ayanokouji. You may have a discussion amongst yourselves." Chabashira-sensei sat on a stool near the front door.

Horikita and Hirata came forward and faced the class. They were eager to discuss Ayanokouji's sudden involvement in all of this.

"Hmph." Kouenji walked out of the room without a care in the world.

Of course, none of them paid him any mind either.

"What's the meaning of this, Horikita-chan?!" asked Yamauchi.

"Did Ayanokouji really set Soshi up?!" followed Ike.

"Do you have an explanation for this, Horikita-san?" added Hondou.

Most of Class A couldn't believe it. And of course, those close to Ayanokouji refused to think of him as the bad guy.

"Are you guys dumb?! Kiyotaka was obviously set up, too!" yelled Sudou.

"Sakagami-sensei and Horikita-san already said it. The sender didn't use their true name. They probably wanted to throw Kiyotaka under the bus," said Miyake.

"I don't think that's entirely right either, Miyake. Sakagami-sensei only said that they weren't sure about it. The reason why he questioned Ayanokouji in the first place is to try and confirm this," argued Hondou.

Hirata wanted to speak, but Horikita stopped him. She calmly watched as they continued.

"I guess you're right, but I still don't think Kiyotaka did it. He has no motive to do so."

"Really now?" Ike raised an eyebrow. "Do you guys remember what happened last Tuesday? We all thought Soshi and Ayanokouji were about to fight. I don't really know what they were arguing about, but Ayanokouji might've held a grudge against Soshi and decided to expel him!"

"Are you crazy?!" Hasebe angrily slammed her desk.

"Kiyotaka-kun wouldn't do that!" cried Sakura.

"Please calm down, Kanji-kun. I don't think that's..." Kushida tried

to mediate things but it wasn't enough.

"Ahh! Now that I think about it, Sakayanagi-chan and that baldie looked for him the very next day! Ayanokouji must've gotten those test questions from them during that time!" Yamauchi passionately supported Ike's argument.

"I remember that..."

"I did see Miyamoto grab Ayanokouji..."

After hearing what Ike and Yamauchi said, their classmates started to have some doubts.

"Fuck... That does make sense..." Hondou contemplated before turning to Horikita and Hirata. "Hey, I don't wanna point fingers, but Kanji and Haruki are right. What the hell is going on?"

"We should probably wait for Ayanokouji-kun to return," Horikita answered before turning to Chabashira-sensei. "Sensei, will Miyamoto-kun be here?"

"Miyamoto will probably come by to get his things."

Everyone didn't know how to feel about Miyamoto right now. They believe that he was set up, but the truth also came out about him being a traitor.

"Alright, we'll wait for both of them."

Since the exam only lasted for half a day, the class was willing to remain inside for a little longer. No one cared if they had to eat past lunchtime. They can't move the conversation forward unless the class is complete.

Meanwhile...

"Do we really need to go all the way to the teacher's faculty, Sensei?" I asked, stopping Sakagami-sensei from his tracks.

The only students left in the building were members of Class A, so doing it even just outside our classroom should do.

"Hmm, I guess not."

"I would like to get back to the classroom as soon as possible so..."

"Then, this hallway should do." Sakagami-sensei took out his pen and raised his clipboard. "Are you ready for the questioning?"

"Yes, please go ahead."

"Alright. Firstly, were you the one who sent the report to me?"

"No."

Sakagami-sensei turned to his paper and started writing. He was probably taking notes of my answers.

"Do you happen to know who it is, then?" he continued.

"No."

"I see... Do you have any idea as to why the sender used your name?"

"No, I don't."

The sound of his pen could be heard as its tip scratched against the paper.

When you're being interrogated, the best thing to do is to stay silent. But in benign settings like schools, you can't really do that, especially as a student. So, the best way to avoid trouble is to give straight and simple answers such as "yes", "no", and "I don't know".

"Hmm, okay... Thank you for answering," he said. "Do you mind if I ask a few more questions?"

"Not at all."

"Alright," Sakagami-sensei flipped a page on his clipboard. "Do you think Miyamoto-kun is guilty?"

"As a classmate, I would like to believe that he isn't."

"Then, how about as a person?"

"As a person, I think I would have the same answer."

"I see..." He looked down at his paper and started writing again. "You were the former leader of Class A. Do you think that has to do with why the sender used your name?"

"I don't know."

"Then, to get a bit off-topic, are you friends with Sakayanagi Arisu of Class B?"

"We know each other, but I wouldn't call us friends."

"I see. Would you say the same thing about Katsuragi Kouhei?"

"Yes."

"Alright, I understand... Then, did you have a conversation with them recently?"

"Yes, on December 1st."

"What did you talk about?"

"Sakayanagi and I had a personal conversation about challenging each other as students while Katsuragi asked for my opinion on the exam."

I would assume that Sakayanagi and Katsuragi would tell the truth, but even if they didn't, I have nothing to lose by telling the truth myself.

"May I see your recent text and call history, as well as your emails? You don't have to show me any of the contents. Just seeing the names of the senders and recipients along with the dates is enough."

"Okay, I don't mind."

Sakagami-sensei watched as I navigated my phone. After a while, he was finally satisfied.

"Thank you," Sakagami-sensei continued writing. "Now, going

back to the case, do you think the real sender is a classmate of yours?"

"I don't know."

"Mhm, I see..." After a brief second of scribbling on his notes, Sakagami-sensei finally turned his eyes back to me. "That's it. Thank you for cooperating, Ayanokouji-kun."

"No problem. I hope I was helpful."

The two of us started making our way back to the classroom.

"Well, it certainly helped clear your name."

"Oh... I see." I'd say that I was being lazy with my answers, but if it works, then that's fine with me.

"To tell you the truth, we've actually investigated your belongings and more. However, no evidence suggested that you're connected to the cheat sheets. So, our suspicion of you was low from the start. The true sender might've just used your name as a cover."

"I guess so..." I'm off the hook, but the problem still remains. "After this, Miyamoto will still be expelled, won't he?"

"That... is still the case, unfortunately... The cheat sheets on him were too much to ignore. The school cannot let him off."

"That's bad news for us," I replied.

Sakagami-sensei could only sigh. It was one thing for his Class D, to catch up to the others, but a student's expulsion was an entirely different story. And with the Paper Shuffle's rules, Mori would also be expelled.

"You seem calm," he commented.

"I get that a lot."

"Hm, is that so? If that's the case, then I can see why you were able to flawlessly lead your class to the top. I think it's a good trait. Losing one's composure can be fatal in many situations."

"I agree."

It didn't take long before Sakagami-sensei and I got back to the classroom. Once we opened the door, everyone instantly turned to look at me.

"Ayanokouji is innocent. He wasn't the sender, and he's not connected to the cheat sheets found in Miyamoto's blazer," Sakagami-sensei announced.

For some reason, he stopped using honorifics when talking to us now, just like he does with Class D. Not that I mind, but I wonder if he feels a little closer to our class now.

"Alright!"

Ken and the others jumped for joy, while most of our classmates heaved a sigh of relief.

"We were just discussing that earlier, Sakagami-sensei. But some

things happened that pointed to Ayanokouji being the one who set up Soshi." Ike spoke as he crossed his arms.

A lot of our classmates gave him a displeased look, but Ike was unfazed.

"Oh? Please elaborate."

"He and Soshi had a little fight last week which could be his motive. The next day after that fight, the leaders of Class B were suddenly looking for him to have a talk. They might've given Class B's test questions to him during that time. And as a classmate, he could easily put those cheat sheets inside Soshi's uniform."

Ike explained his points while Yamauchi and Hondou stared at me in scrutiny.

At that moment, a sliding door at the other end of the classroom suddenly opened.

"Soshi!"

"Miyamoto..."

"Miyamoto-kun..."

The class probably had mixed feelings about Miyamoto right now. However, none of them probably wanted him to get expelled regardless of what they thought of him. The consequences were too severe.

"I'm just... here to get my things..." he spoke without any vigor.

"Hey, Soshi, stay here for a while! We're still trying to fight for your innocence!" Yamauchi called for him.

Miyamoto ignored Yamauchi and made his way to the lockers on the back.

"Hey, Soshi!" Hondou shouted.

"It's pointless! You can't disprove the evidence... It's over for me..."

"There's still a chance! Since you're really innocent, then someone must've set you up! The only person that had beef with you was Ayanokouji, right?! We're trying to get some answers from him right now!" Ike followed up.

"You can stay there for a bit, Miyamoto. I think your knowledge of this case might help satisfy your classmates," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Fine..."

"Then, would you like to refute their points, Ayanokouji?" Sakagami-sensei asked.

"Hmm... Well, during the day that Horikita and Hirata submitted our test questions, Miyamoto talked to me about him picking a fight the day before."

I didn't really plan on "refuting" anything, but I don't mind telling them what happened.

"Oh? What did Miyamoto want to talk about?"

"He wanted to apologize," I said, much to his friends' surprise. "He also said that he picked a fight with me because Ryuuen ordered him to do it."

"S-Seriously...?"

"That can't be..."

Meanwhile, my friends from the Ayanokouji Group were nodding in agreement. I'd told them about it on the same day, so they could vouch for me, too.

"Is this true, Miyamoto?" Sakagami-sensei turned to him.

"Yes, it's true." Since even Miyamoto himself admitted to it, the issue of my motive was promptly cleared.

"T-Then what about your talk with the Class B leaders?" pressed Ike.

"We talked, but that's it. I didn't really ask for the test questions like what you're suggesting," I answered.

"You can't prove that!" shouted Yamauchi.

Sakagami-sensei cleared his throat to get everyone's attention.

"Actually, Sakayanagi and Katsuragi had mentioned their talk with Ayanokouji during that day. After hearing some details, we also checked the footage of their conversation. None of them made physical contact nor did they use their phones."

"But what if they only agreed to digitally send him the questions later? The security cameras don't have audio, right?" argued Hondou.

"Great point, Hondou. However, we've already taken that into account. We've checked Sakayanagi, Katsuragi, and Ayanokouji's phones to trace any possible link to the creation of those cheat sheets."

"B-But what if they just deleted the evidence?!" asked Yamauchi.

"Then unless you can prove that they did, it's the same as the evidence not existing in the first place."

"And for your last argument," Chabashira-sensei stood up from her seat and faced everyone. "Can you prove that Ayanokouji was the one who physically put the cheat sheets inside Miyamoto's blazer? We've already checked everything surrounding Ayanokouji-- his belongings, footage where he can be seen, the Class B students he's had conversations with-- but none of them pointed to his guilt."

"That's..." Ike and the others fell silent.

Everything was already accounted for. In the end, I was just another victim, much like Mori.

"I told you... It's over for me," Miyamoto made a self-deprecating laugh.

Kikuchi stood up and approached Miyamoto.

"Say, Miyamoto. Do you really have no idea who set you up? Nene's been unfairly caught up in this, you know?" he asked.

"I have no idea. Whoever it is, they won. I don't really care anymore."

"So that's it? You're done with this?" Kikuchi sounded normal, but as he continued talking, a subtle change in his voice was slowly starting to become more and more apparent.

"I mean, what else can I do? I don't have a single clue on how to get myself out of this situation."

"You sound pretty calm for someone who's about to get expelled," Kikuchi commented.

"Heh, I could say the same to you, considering how Mori's getting expelled."

Kikuchi suddenly grabbed Miyamoto's collar with one hand and drew his face closer.

"Eita!" Mori shouted in concern.

"Calm, huh?" Even from afar, the small tremble in Kikuchi's voice could be heard, and his eyes looked like daggers that were ready to cut Miyamoto's throat. "Look at me in the eyes, Miyamoto. Do I look calm to you?"

"Kikuchi, don't do anything rash," Chabashira-sensei called out to him.

"Heh, so you're resorting to violence now?"

Kikuchi pushed Miyamoto as he let go.

"I have no qualms about a traitor like you getting expelled, but Nene shouldn't pay for your mistakes."

"Don't get me wrong. It's not like I wanted Mori to suffer with me, but that's just the rules. If you can't prove my innocence, then you can't save Mori either!"

The students of Class A felt a heavy blow from Miyamoto's words. However, the person who was affected the most wasn't any of them. It wasn't Horikita either...

"Sensei... Is there... Is there any way for them to be saved...?" Hirata's shaky voice caused everyone to look at him.

"Some of you might already know this, but according to the rules, a normal expulsion can be revoked by paying the right amount of private points."

"How much should we pay, Sensei?" Kikuchi asked, not waiting for Hirata's response.

"20 million private points per student. If you can pay 40 million points, you can save your classmates *and* your class points."

Chabashira-sensei specifically used the word "revoke" for a reason. If we pay 20 million private points, we can make it so that the expulsion never happened in the first place. In other words, the

penalty on our class points won't apply either.

"Hey, Ijuuin. Do we have enough?" Kikuchi instantly called for the class banker's attention.

"Yes. We barely have enough," Ijuuin nodded with a smile.

Ike and his group were confused, but they could tell that a solution had presented itself. Even Miyamoto's eyes started to light up in hope.

"However, we can only afford to save one person."

Sadly, Ijuuin's next words put an end to that hope.

Vol. 6: Chapter 13.4 - The Harsh Truth

"The answer's obvious. We're saving Nene," Kikuchi's decisiveness made everyone gasp for air.

"Hey, Kikuchi! You can't just decide that!" barked Yamauchi.

"Hah? Of course, I can. Do you think this class won't choose Nene over a traitor?" he sighed.

"Let's do a vote to settle this once and for all," Horikita finally broke her silence. "Would that be alright with everyone?"

"That's more like it," said Kikuchi.

Horikita rode Kikuchi's momentous pace and immediately got to work. The two of them took the lead in moving this situation forward... while Hirata's gaze stayed down.

"Those who want to save Miyamoto-kun, please raise your hands."

Only four hands were raised, including Miyamoto. Just from this, the results were already obvious. Their group can't help but gnash their teeth in frustration.

"Those who want to save Mori-san, please raise your hands."

"Sorry... Miyamoto," said Onizuka.

"I'm so sorry, Soshi-kun..." Kikyou muttered.

As expected, most of the class voted for this decision, including me. However, someone didn't cast their vote at all. Everyone was surprised by this.

"Hirata-kun..."

Saying that Hirata didn't look well would be an understatement, making him a cause for concern in our class. It's not that he didn't vote. It was more like he wasn't in the condition to vote at all. We weren't even sure if he was listening.

"Let's finish this up." Kikuchi's voice brought everyone back to the problem at hand. "Sensei, we'll save Nene for 20 million points."

"Does everyone agree on this?" Horikita rallied the class along with Kikuchi.

"Yes, save her."

"Save Nene-chan."

"I'd rather save Mori than Miyamoto."

Because of a majority vote, it was decided that Mori's expulsion would be reversed.

"The school hasn't finalized its decision yet, so wait until tomorrow. We'll settle everything after the exam," Chabashira-sensei

opened the door and walked away.

"I'll report everything that's happened here. Miyamoto, prepare your things and get ready. You can depart as early as tomorrow noon," Sakagami-sensei left those parting words before following Chabashira-sensei out of the room.

Miyamoto's eyes were distant. His dry, raspy voice was evident ever since he came here, and the red marks around his eyes were slowly starting to become more apparent. I can only imagine how much he tried to struggle-- how much he tried to plead for his innocence.

"I understand, Sensei..."

However, he'd stopped clinging to hope.

But after looking at his eyes, it doesn't seem like he wants to give up in a normal fashion.

"Now then, I'd like to remind everyone that the final exam isn't over yet." Horikita raised her voice with a pair of claps. "It's extremely unfortunate, but we can't do anything about Miyamoto-kun's situation now..."

He wants to light a fire and burn this class down.

"Of course, because someone like me is just an afterthought, right?" Miyamoto scoffed.

"You know that's not what I'm trying to say, Miyamoto-kun."

"I know, I know. It's because I'm a traitor. You all agree, right? That's why you voted to save Mori!" His voice intensified as he addressed everyone inside the classroom.

"Yeah, that's right." Akito's chair made a noise after he shifted its position to face Miyamoto. "What? Tryna make us feel guilty for it? You have to remember, Miyamoto, you brought this upon yourself."

"Oh, did I, now? Are you sure about that?"

"Well, if you didn't, then who did?"

Miyamoto glanced at Horikita.

"Say, Horikita-san. You should have an idea of how well we're going to do in this exam thanks to that mock test. You'd told us that we did great-- that we've improved... But do you think it's enough to beat Class B and Class C in this exam?"

It was a genuinely good question. Our classmates were most likely curious about that, as well.

"No, it's not. We're still lagging behind them in academics," Horikita answered without hesitation.

This earned a few murmurs among our classmates.

"So you're saying that we'll lose, right? How much would that cost us? A hundred class points? Since Sakayanagi-san's class will probably take the top, we would've been demoted back to Class B even if I didn't get expelled."

"You're not wrong," she replied.

"Heh, that's what I thought."

"What are you trying to pull here, Miyamoto-kun...?" asked Matsushita.

Bam

Miyamoto slammed his fist against the lockers beside him, making an extremely loud banging noise.

"What am I trying to pull here?! Are you all blind?! Can't you all fucking see?! This class is going downhill!"

His voice reverberated inside the entire classroom.

"That's why I decided to become a traitor! I needed money! If I had enough money, then I could buy a seat in the class that becomes Class A by the end of graduation! If it weren't for this class being shitty, and its leaders not being on the same level as the other leaders, I wouldn't have made that deal with Ryuuen!"

"Soshi..." Even his friends couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"Just so you know, I wanted to save enough money to get you three a seat, too..." Miyamoto smiled melancholically as he looked at Ike and the others. "But that's all for nothing now... Someone got me, and I don't even know who it is..."

Miyamoto turned to me with a condemning look.

"Do you care about this class, Ayanokouji?" he asked.

"Will my answer make any difference?" I replied with a question.

"Keh, you can't even answer me straight. That's already telling of what you feel."

"What I feel, huh?" A small sigh escaped my lips.

I didn't want to continue talking-- there was no need to. And besides, whatever I say would probably result in something troublesome, anyway.

"Tch, you're a fucking weirdo, Ayanokouji. I can't believe this class trusts your bullshit when you don't even care about them."

"Did Ryuuen tell you that?" I asked.

"Well, is he wrong?"

"What do you think? It's strange for you to believe what he said when you're the one who's a member of this class, not him. Are you incapable of making your own judgment?"

"Are you hearing yourself? The fact that I chose to do something on my own-- betraying this class, not following Horikita-san like a sheep, and trying to secure a spot in Class A-- I'm more than capable of making my own judgment!"

I gave Karuizawa a quick glance. I wasn't interested in continuing this conversation. If anyone can help me right now, it was her.

"I see now. So you're blaming Horikita-san and Yousuke-kun for

losing to the other leaders, and you're blaming Ayanokouji-kun for stepping down." Karuizawa crossed her arms and gave him a scornful look.

"That's right. You may all think I'm being an absolute prick for all of this, but you'll eventually realize that I'm right. This class will keep on losing and losing. It won't take long before you guys are back in Class D, and more students will be expelled," Miyamoto sneered. "Hahaha, I mean look at us. We were all labeled as defects in the beginning. We were just lucky to have Ayanokouji on our side. Now that he's not doing things like he did before, the difference between us and the other classes is starting to show!"

"And so? Does that make it okay for you to betray the class? Like, the entirety of this mess was your fault, to begin with."

"That's why I kept things hidden in the first place," he shrugged. "I know I'm just reaping what I sowed, but you idiots should open your eyes. This *class* doesn't deserve to be in Class A."

Even Karuizawa couldn't help but falter after hearing Miyamoto's words.

After I stepped down, he was led to believe that our class would eventually lose its position. The facts were right in front of everyone, and Miyamoto made them face the harsh truth. We lost the sports festival, and we're bound to lose the Paper Shuffle Exam, too. They can't really deny what they can see with their own eyes. They were starting to doubt themselves, and they were starting to doubt Horikita.

And after doubt... comes distrust.

Author's Notes:

They let Miyamoto cook, so he started spittin'.

Kiyotaka just wants to sleep.

Vol. 6: Chapter 13.5 - The Man on a Mission

"Can we just... stop this?" Hirata's distinct voice caused everyone to shift their gazes.

"Hirata-kun... What do you mean?" asked Horikita.

"This is too cruel. We shouldn't be piling up on someone like this."

Horikita's sharp expression softened as she looked at Hirata's face of grief, suffering, and resistance.

"You've got it wrong, Hirata-kun. We're not piling up on anyone. We're just trying to make Miyamoto-kun understand that he has to take responsibility for his actions."

"Responsibility...? Do we even have the right to judge that?"

"No, we don't... But the school does, and they're punishing him. The purpose of this conversation is not to get Miyamoto-kun expelled. It's to save Mori-san. Every one of us just wants to make that happen."

Whether the class likes it or not, the school will eventually decide to expel Miyamoto. But Mori is also caught up in it, and Kikuchi just wants everyone in the class to save her. Hirata already knew that, but for some reason, he couldn't just accept it.

"But still..."

Horikita walked up to him and said something that only they could hear. Hirata's eyes opened wide as he desperately tried to hold himself together.

"Can I trust you...?" he simply asked.

"Yes, please trust me."

Horikita's answer was devoid of calculation. Hirata saw this more clearly than anyone else. And so, he nodded and let things be. After seeing this, our classmates, who probably felt a subtle hint of doubt towards Horikita, started to look relieved.

Ever since the start of school, the one who held this class together was none other than Hirata Yousuke. If he decided to trust Horikita, they should also put their faith in her.

"Tch, this is ridiculous."

Miyamoto tightened his hold on his things before walking out of the room.

"H-Hey, Soshi, wait!"

His friends immediately ran after him.

And with that, the class discussion finally ended.

Honestly, I just wanted to eat lunch already so I could go home and sleep.

The conversations about the situation continued until the very end of the day in our class group chat. However, none of our classmates could figure out the real truth. It's easy to point fingers as to who was responsible, but without actual proof, it's just useless chatter.

Shinohara, in particular, was scrutinized by a lot of the girls because she stayed relatively silent during the entire thing. She managed to get by after saying that she didn't want to say anything useless. But given her recent closeness to Ike, it's understandable for her to act passively against him or his group in serious situations like that. And siding with them is an even more dangerous option for her given how Karuizawa and the other girls would see it.

Then there was Hirata. Everyone can see that he's got all of the group chat's messages on read, but he wasn't participating in the discussion. Some students would occasionally @ him, but even if his response was normal, it would usually close the conversation immediately. That said, everyone was at least happy to see him back to normal. It was quite a shock to see him suddenly turn into a completely different person. Even I was surprised.

We would take the second and last day of the exam with the weight of an expelled classmate bearing on our shoulders. This could be seen on each Class A student's face.

"Good morning, everyone." Hirata greeted everyone normally.

He obviously understood the situation, so he didn't smile like he usually does.

"Good morning, Yousuke-kun. Are you ready for the exam?" Karuizawa clung to him with her classic grin.

"He should be asking you that, Kei-chan." Matsushita chimed in with a tease.

"Sorry, but I'm not as smart as you, Chiaki-chan. I'm more adorable, though. Right, Yousuke-kun~?"

Their banter started to loosen up the heavy tension inside the classroom.

Matsushita and Karuizawa hung out a lot since the start of school, usually with Mori. That said, Matsushita didn't really think of

Karuizawa as a close friend given her overbearing attitude. Only after the Island Exam did they become truly close friends.

In another part of the classroom, Horikita was talking to Mori and Kikuchi. Even from where I was, everything looked clear-- Horikita's concern, Mori's tough smile, and Kikuchi's light-heartedness.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun." Kikyou arrived at the classroom and greeted me with a faint smile.

As expected, she acted similarly to how Hirata did. Their ability to read the room was already top-notch, but the way they could perfectly respond to what it demanded was on another level... Or maybe that's just a normal thing for people and I'm the weird one for thinking it's amazing.

"Good morning, Kikyou."

Meanwhile, most of our other classmates focused on reviewing the study materials while they could.

When the exams started, the sound of pencils and erasers scratching and bumping against papers on desks felt much louder than it should've been.

Eventually, the final exam of the second semester finally ended, signaled by the bell's chime.

"Now then, let's address the issue from yesterday." Chabashira-sensei neatly placed the stack of answered test papers on the podium.

The Paper Shuffle Exam was over, and now, we'd have to tie the remaining loose end.

The sliding door opened and Miyamoto came inside wearing his school uniform. His face was the same as usual, but he looked a lot calmer than yesterday. It seems like he's come to terms with his expulsion.

Hirata was initially giving him an intense stare, but his eyes eventually mellowed out. After seeing Miyamoto, he, too, had finally accepted what has and will happen.

"The school has made a decision. Miyamoto Soshi will be expelled for cheating, and because of the rules of the Paper Shuffle Exam, his partner, Mori Nene, will also be expelled."

"Chabashira-sensei, we would like to save Mori-san from expulsion." Horikita stood up.

"You'd have to pay 20 million private points."

Horikita approached Chabashira-sensei as they both accessed their smartphones.

With an audible ping, the transaction had been completed.

"I've received 20 million private points from Horikita Suzune of Class A. With this, Mori Nene will not be expelled."

Mori watched the entire thing with teary eyes. 20 million points was a lot, and this decision caused our class bank to lose more than 97% of what it had. However, none of this was Mori's fault. I'm sure no one in the class would blame her for what happened, but it's inevitable for her to feel some guilt.

"According to the rules, in the event that a student was saved from this type of expulsion, they would need to get half of the minimum total score required for each pair. In this case, Mori would need to score at least 346 points in total."

Mori nodded solemnly. Based on Horikita's data on the mock test, Mori easily surpassed 600 points. 346 points wasn't much in comparison.

"Miyamoto, do you have any parting words for your class?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Since this is the last time I'll be here, I wanted to say goodbye, at least. My decision to side with Ryuen wasn't personal, but it's a fact that my plans would cause the class to fall even faster. And since Mori was just a casualty, it's only natural for her to be saved." Miyamoto spoke calmly before turning away from us. "I still stand by what I said yesterday, so it's about time you guys open your eyes. Later."

"Head to the teachers' faculty, Miyamoto. We'll complete the process there before you leave the school." Chabashira-sensei said as she faced us. "You're all dismissed."

None of us smiled even until Miyamoto left the room. Because of his expulsion, our class will lose 300 class points. After it takes effect next month, our demotion will be inevitable. And more than that, his words cut deep into the minds of our classmates.

Ike, Yamauchi, and Hondou left to go see Miyamoto off while the rest of the class dispersed.

As of today, Class A will only have 39 students left.

That night, I received a call from Hirata. He said he wanted to talk. After I finished cleaning up my dinner, I sent him a message that he could come to my room now.

It didn't take long until I heard a knock on my door.

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun... Sorry for imposing on you like this."

"It's fine. The exam season just ended. We're free as free can be."

Actually, I've been wanting to sleep soon, but I'm also curious as to what Hirata has to say.

The two of us sat across from each other in the dining area.

"So, what did you wanna talk about?"

"It's about all of this-- about Miyamoto-kun..."

"You did seem pretty shaken... even more so than any of our classmates."

"Yes... I'm sorry... I just can't bear to see someone get isolated like that."

"Miyamoto betrayed us, and he got expelled after failing to prove his innocence. Logically speaking, you should've joined everyone's side when they chastised him."

"But--"

"But you can't. It has something to do with your past, right? About why you want to save everyone."

Hirata wasn't just a guy who wanted to help people. His ideals weren't limited to his friends and classmates either. The main reason why he left Karuizawa's case to me was because he didn't want to against even someone like Manabe. His concern for others could only be described as pathological. It wasn't normal.

"Well, I did say that I was going to tell you about it someday..." Hirata shifted his gaze downward as he cracked a wry smile.

"If now is a good time, then I'm all ears."

He nodded in response.

"You see, until my second year in middle school, I didn't really stand out. I was an average nobody."

"You? That's hard to believe."

"Well, I *did* have friends. I had this one friend ever since I was little. His name was Sugimura. We were in the same class together for six years all throughout elementary school. We were neighbors, so we walked to and from school together every day."

Hirata spoke like he was recalling some fleeting memory.

"When we started junior high, we were put into separate classes for the first time. At first, we kept going to school together just like we always had. But gradually, we walked together less and less. I started to only hang out with other guys from my new class. That story probably sounds normal enough, I suppose."

"Yeah. I mean, it's perfectly normal to make new friends in a new environment."

I didn't think there was anything odd about that.

"But you see, while I had my new friends, Sugimura-kun was bullied."

Hirata clenched his fists. Just by knowing that, I already knew where this was going.

"Sugimura-kun sent me SOSs over and over. He'd show up with cuts on his face, or with bruises on different parts of his body... But

I cared more about hanging out with my new friends and never took him seriously. Sugimura-kun was always headstrong, and quick to get into fights. I didn't think too deeply about what was happening."

Maybe he did, but he convinced himself that it wasn't as bad as it really was.

"When we entered our second year, we reunited. By then, Sugimura-kun's spirit had shattered. His bright, cheerful personality was gone. That was only natural after being beaten down so much. He'd been punched and kicked so many times. They hounded him so much that he couldn't even go to the bathroom... He ended up having accidents during class as a result..."

"So you saw that and..."

"Yeah... I didn't do anything. I couldn't. I was afraid I'd become their next target. I was afraid that my new, fun life would be destroyed. So I pretended not to see Sugimura-kun, my oldest friend. I came up with convenient excuses for myself. I thought someday the bullies would just stop. Maybe once Sugimura-kun stopped going to school, they'd leave him alone. Or maybe... someone else would step in to help him."

Hirata didn't. The teachers didn't. If they couldn't, then who else would?

"They didn't stop, did they? And no one helped him in the end."

"Yes... That day was burned into my memory. After morning soccer practice, I returned to the classroom. When I got to the room, I saw that Sugimura-kun was already there and his face was swollen. I decided to wait a bit before going in. I felt uncomfortable. We'd been friends who played together ever since we were little, but right then, it felt like we were complete strangers. I was too afraid, thinking that I'd be bullied if I got involved with him."

That kind of paranoia is perfectly normal in our society today, but that doesn't make Hirata's decisions acceptable from an ethical standpoint. Everything about it, everything surrounding it-- all of it leads to suffering.

"Perhaps Sugimura-kun saw how ugly my heart was. He didn't say a word, but it was almost like he was sending out a plea for help..." Hirata's voice shook for a moment. "That day, he jumped out of the classroom window."

"I see... What happened to him?"

"He didn't die, but he was declared brain dead. Despite that, Sugimura-kun's parents believe he'll recover. They're waiting for him," Hirata heaved a small sigh. "That day was so surreal that I sometimes wonder if it was a hallucination. I couldn't believe it."

When Sugimura-kun jumped, I realized something. By selfishly focusing so much on my own desires, I helped drive a treasured friend to his death."

And so, the man named Hirata Yousuke was born.

"I... don't think Sugimura-kun can be saved, but I wanted to atone. I figure the only way for me to do that is to save others," he said.

"Wouldn't it be impossible? Right now, someone like Sugimura-kun might be getting bullied somewhere. If they decide to take their own life, you won't be able to stop them."

"Of course, I know that. Unfortunately, I'm not a superhero that can save them... But I want to save the people close to me, at least. I want to help them... No, I *must* help them. That's my penance for the sin I committed."

"And you want to save Miyamoto, as well?"

"I wanted to, but it was impossible. I should be able to accept it like everyone else. He was at fault for betraying the class, so the choice between him and Mori-san was easy... But Miyamoto-kun was also a victim. He didn't really cheat. That's what makes it hard for me."

Hirata was putting up a front by acting normal in front of everyone, but he couldn't get over how Miyamoto was unjustly punished. He wanted to save him until the end.

"Did Miyamoto really not try to cheat?"

To fix this, I asked a question that would make him doubt the victim instead.

"What...?"

"Well, you and Horikita couldn't prove his innocence. Maybe Miyamoto was lying the entire time."

"But... But that can't be! He had no motive to do so..."

"Really? I thought he had enough motive."

"What do you mean...?"

"Well, even if Miyamoto lied about being threatened by Ryuen, it's still true that he likes Asahina-senpai. When our class continues to fall down from grace, it'll gather eyes from other people, even more so than it did before. If Miyamoto becomes an academic pillar for the class, it'll be easier for him to get noticed by the girl she likes."

"Is that... how it works?"

"I'm just trying to put things together. You've noticed it too, right? Miyamoto has been working hard on making connections with the seniors. He even joined the baseball club."

"I guess you're right..."

It might've been a stretch, but it's fine as long it works right now.

"I'm not saying that he absolutely planned on cheating. I'm just trying to look at it from a different perspective. You never know if the person you're trying to deem as a victim was actually the culprit."

Miyamoto's calm demeanor during his departure also helps reinforce this idea.

"We managed to save Mori by making use of the bank, but because of that, our class will have to be more careful than ever. And as the leader, they need your support..."

"I understand..." Hirata nodded. "Thank you for listening to me, Ayanokouji-kun."

"No problem. And as your fellow leader, it's good that Horikita's got your back."

"Yes... I've actually told her about my past a while ago. Horikita-san confronted me about my abnormal desire to save others, so I wanted to make her understand."

Hirata stood up and got ready to leave.

"I feel a lot better now. You two are among the few people that I trust in this school, after all."

"Even if I don't have the same role as you guys, I'll do my best to help my friends."

"Yes, I know you would," he smiled. "Thanks again, Ayanokouji-kun. If you need my help as well, then... No, nevermind. I'm sure you'll be fine."

Even my words weren't the complete truth, they weren't lies either.

Author's Notes:

By Volume 6, Hirata and Horikita of Alter are already way closer than Hirata and Horikita of canon CotE in Volume 10. Add Horikita's quicker emotional maturity, then it would be easy to see why she didn't try to fight an emotionally unstable Hirata with her words like what she did in canon Volume 10. Instead, she tried to calm him down.

This dynamic was something that Kiyotaka had initially planned since Volume 1. At first, Kiyotaka only wanted to use Hirata as a guide for Horikita's growth. However, after Hirata showed him a glimpse of his vulnerability in Volume 4, he felt like Horikita would play a big role in keeping him afloat in case things start sinking.

From a narrative perspective, the purpose of this arc is to set up how the class itself becomes the judge during the Voting Exam, and that will

be Hirata's true breaking point.

Vol. 6: Chapter 14.1 - On a Cold Afternoon

Some hours earlier, on that very same day, Sakayanagi Arisu enjoyed the cool air under the shade. With the Paper Shuffle Exam ending, news about the outcome of her plans could finally be confirmed.

"Do you think snow will fall this season?" she asked her companions.

"Doesn't it snow in Tokyo every year?" Kamuro asked with a question of her own.

"You're technically right, Masumi-san. However, Tokyo typically only gets a day or two of light snowfall. And whenever that's the case, snow would hardly collect on the ground."

"I remember it snowing for ten straight days in Tokyo back when I was little. Do you want it to snow for that long?"

"Why, yes," she nodded. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a White Christmas?"

"I personally like the sight of the city being dyed in white during winter, so I'm all for snow," Hashimoto stated in his opinion.

"You're quite the aesthetic person, aren't you, Hashimoto-kun?"

"Haha, maybe. Aren't you the same, Sakayanagi?"

"I would like to say so. Kitou-kun is also an aesthetic person, right?"

"Isn't artistic the better word for Kitou, though?" asked Kamuro. "I can't really say the same for myself, but I can also appreciate something that looks nice when I see one."

Anyone who wasn't part of Class B wouldn't immediately associate Kitou with the word "artistic" after they see him.

"Fufu, I guess that goes for most people. Humans are naturally drawn to beauty, after all."

Hearing Sakayanagi's words, Hashimoto smiled at Kamuro, but this only made her cringe in repulsion.

"Well, aren't you excited, Sakayanagi?"

The person they've been waiting for has finally arrived. Ryuuken Kakeru approached them with a single person behind him named Yamada Albert.

"Mashima-sensei, being the freshmen's coordinator, was busy with a certain student's matters. So, Class B was dismissed a few minutes early after we'd all collectively finished the exam before the time

limit."

"Kukuku. A certain student's matters, eh? So you've heard the news yesterday."

"Everyone in our class would suspect something if we were suddenly brought in for questioning. So? What was the school's final decision?" Sakayanagi asked, smiling as if she already knew the answer.

"Miyamoto has been expelled," Ryuen replied.

The Class B students had differing reactions, but it can't be denied that this news was good for them.

"Excellent. As promised, you'll get to keep the entirety of Miyamoto-kun's private points plus my payment for your assistance."

Sakayanagi made a gesture prompting Hashimoto to bring his phone out.

"What do you mean? Our goal was to execute two of their students, remember? I honestly didn't think they'd have enough solidarity to save one person even if they had a stash of money cooped up somewhere..."

"It's the price we have to pay for getting Ayanokouji-kun involved," she sighed.

"What are you saying, Sakayanagi? I don't understand." Ryuen frowned in displeasure.

"It was inevitable. My goal was to get students from Class A expelled. Ayanokouji-kun probably wouldn't have done anything if that was the only thing we did. However, your goal was to stain his reputation inside his class, right? That, or you want Ayanokouji-kun's class to push him back to his previous position as the class leader. You were directly trying to oppose him, that's why he did something to push back against our plan."

"So you're saying that Ayanokouji was the real reason why Mori was saved?"

"I cannot guarantee anything, but that's what I'd like to believe."

The moment Sakayanagi understood that Ryuen planned on indirectly attacking Ayanokouji, she gave up on the idea that Class A would lose 700 class points in one go.

At the same time, it felt like Ayanokouji was sending a message. He didn't care about what they were doing, but if they tried to mess with him, he was more than capable of throwing a wrench into their plans.

Ryuen's frown slowly turned into his usual grin.

"Heh, it's honestly not that bad. At the end of the day, we still took 300 class points and 20 million private points away from them. And even if, by some miracle, they perform a lot better in the

exam, Miyamoto won't have a score. They'd have a guaranteed deficit of at least 800 points."

Losing the Paper Shuffle Exam would cost Class A 100 class points on top of the expulsion penalty.

"Unfortunately, that miracle won't happen. In fact, they might've performed worse because of stress."

"Then that's 400 class points down the drain for them, huh?"

"What about Class D? You'd lose 100 class points after the Paper Shuffle too, you know?"

"It doesn't matter as long as we pass. A couple million private points should be enough compensation."

"Then what about your accomplice?" Sakayanagi asked. "I'm sure they've worked hard."

"Kukuku... That bastard doesn't really care much about anything else as long as it moves him closer to his goal."

"Oh, really now? Then, I don't see the need to get involved with them anymore."

After delivering the news, Ryuen turned around and started walking away.

"What's your plan now, Ryuen-kun? It doesn't seem like Ayanokouji-kun is budging at your attempts. You've lost every single fight against him so far. Don't you think it's starting to look pathetic?"

In the face of Sakayanagi's provocation, Ryuen's smile widened even more.

"You don't win big unless you're used to losing, Sakayanagi. Do you think I'm aimlessly running around without a master plan?"

"Fufufu, I see. So you're not afraid of losing your battles because you'll eventually win the war."

"Exactly, and I don't need your help in any of it. Working with you is just my way of earning extra cash." The sharpness in Ryuen's eyes became writ large. "You want to destroy Class A. I want to destroy Ayanokouji. Our goals had aligned *just a little bit*, but that doesn't mean we're allies." (1)

"It seems like there's nothing for me to worry about, then."

"Worry? What a load of bullshit. You can probably already see it with your own eyes, Sakayanagi. I hold the most powerful weapon in this world-- the power that everyone will eventually bend their knees to."

"Yes, clearly." Sakayanagi smiled as she glanced at Ryuen and Albert. "Wielding such a weapon will make you reign supreme. Even I would have to agree with that."

Ryuen huffed in glee, knowing that Sakayanagi wasn't lying.

However, he could sense something else behind her smile. Not

knowing what it was piqued him.

"You shouldn't relax just because you're back on top, Sakayanagi. After I'm done with Ayanokouji, you're next." He spoke as he stepped away from them.

"I'm looking forward to it, Ryuuken-kun," Sakayanagi muttered with a giggle.

Author's Notes:

1. *"You want to destroy Class A. I want to destroy Ayanokouji. We are not the same."* - Ryuuken Kakeru.

Volume 6, end.

Vol. 7: Chapter 1.1 - Decision

Inside my room, I held my phone with trembling hands.

"Why...?"

I repeatedly looked at a message with an attached photo sent to me a few minutes before I entered my room.

The sender... was none other than our class's enemy, Ryuuken Kakeru.

[Why don't you tell me about your old days?] The message read.

The image showed the front gate of a middle school that read "Sakuragaoka Academy".

"H-How...?"

My breathing started to become shallow, and my fingers became cold. My legs trembled as my footing slowly collapsed. My mind was starting to become scattered.

"Should I respond? Should I confront him? Should I ignore him?"

Even as I thought of all the viable courses of action, I already knew the final answer.

"I don't know what to do..."

Powerless. That's how I feel right now.

The face of a boy came to mind. He was the person I would always run to. He was the person that I trusted the most.

"But he lied to me..." I muttered.

The two of us acted like we usually did even after I found out about his lies regarding the bugs, so he must've been wondering why I didn't confront him. But it's not like I can just ask him about it either. We were at a standstill, more so than we ever did.

For the first time, the two of us feigned ignorance towards each other's blatant acting.

I was afraid. I was given a subtle warning about getting carried away.

The arrogant girl inside of me was ground to dust and became afraid. She was reminded that her position in his heart wasn't absolute. And now that Miyamoto-kun was expelled, her fears felt more pronounced.

Can I really trust him...?

What does he want me to do...?

No, those weren't the questions that I should answer.

I gathered my strength and stood up. It was time to make a

decision-- one that would decide my fate moving forward.

This isn't up to him or anyone else. It's up to *me*.

Vol. 7: Chapter 2.1 - The Aftermath

Even with the end-of-year exam ending, the second semester still has a couple of weeks left before winter break. And just a few days after the Paper Shuffle Exam, the results were finally announced.

This was rather welcome for Class A. The news about Miyamoto's expulsion eventually spread and it became the talk of the town for the first-years. The class was obviously uncomfortable with this, so a new hot topic for everyone to tattle about was much appreciated.

"Woah..."

"These results are insane!"

"Class B and Class C had a difference of two points!"

"That's literally one question away from a tie!"

Since the match-ups were spread across all classes, the school had decided to publicly show our scores.

Thankfully, the nail-biting closeness between Class B and Class C's scores took everyone's attention away.

Looking at our scores, we could've realistically broken through 25,000 points if Miyamoto managed to take the exam. And there's the mental burden of the incident wearing the entire class down, too.

That said, even if we did get 25,000 points, there would still be a sizable gap between us and the other two classes.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

Hirata greeted me as soon as I walked inside the classroom.

I glanced at the area where Miyamoto previously sat and saw that his desk and chair were gone.

"Good morning, Hirata. Did you see the results?" I asked.

"Yes... It's unfortunate, but we tried our best. According to Horikita-san, we've actually surpassed our previous results from the mock test. Even if we lost this time, the growth of our classmates cannot be denied."

"She plans on announcing this later, right?"

"If Chabashira-sensei gives us permission, then yes. I'll be there with her, as always."

"I see. Business as usual for the leaders. It's gonna be tough, but I think you two have done a good job in weathering the storm."

Hearing my praise, the subtle tension in Hirata's eyes began to relax.

"Your opinion matters a lot. Horikita-san and I look up to you, after all."

"You're giving me too much credit..."

After putting my things in place, I was approached by my neighbor.

"Did you sleep well?" It was the first sentence I managed to say after looking at Horikita.

After all, she was...

"Yes, but barely. I stayed up quite a bit last night."

"Even though the exams are over?"

"I was reading a book."

"Ah, of course." Now that's something that I can relate to. "A classic, I assume?"

"Raymond Chandler's," she replied.

"You really have good taste."

I'm happy that Horikita and I have become close enough that she can openly share what book she is reading. I wonder if I should start recommending light novels to her.

"Why did you ask?"

"Well, I mean... Why else would you decide to eat your breakfast here...? And you haven't even finished it."

Horikita slowly munched on her onigiri as we talked. She only took little bites, small enough to not impede her speech too much.

"I'll be done soon," she replied, averting her gaze away.

Some of the boys probably found Horikita's appearance cute and endearing seeing how much they were staring at her with blushing cheeks.

"What does it have?" I asked.

"Cheese," she promptly answered before taking another bite.

Cheese is a viable option, but that would make the onigiri more akin to a snack rather than a breakfast.

"You have weird breakfast choices."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who eats baby back ribs at seven in the morning."

"Touché."

It seems like Horikita was back to her usual self, or at least that's what I'm seeing right now.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun."

On the other hand, Kikyou was finally starting to show some cracks in her tough act. Her smile had become more strained ever since Miyamoto got expelled. Ryuen must've been amping up his pressure on her.

"Good morning, Kikyou. Are you alright? You don't look good."

"Well, yes... I didn't have enough sleep last night..."

Her words were an indirect cry for help.

So she's finally made up her mind, huh?

"I see..." I leaned closer and whispered in her ear. "Ryuuen was bothering you, wasn't he?"

Kikyuu's body tensed up. Knowing that she couldn't deny it anymore, she meekly nodded her head in response.

"I want to go to your room later," she muttered softly.

I nodded without saying anything in return.

It didn't take long before it was finally time for homeroom. Chabashira-sensei walked in with her usual stern face. After giving us a rundown of the expected schedule before winter break, she readily gave us the remaining free time to have a class discussion. Given the recent events pertaining to the condition of our class, she knew, as our class adviser, that being on the same page is a must, especially for the upcoming third semester.

"With Miyamoto's untimely departure and your class's loss in the Paper Shuffle Exam, you can expect a demotion next month, in January. That said, I urge you to keep moving forward. Your class managed to make it on top. If you think you're worthy of staying on top, then seize that spot again with all your might."

Her speech motivated our classmates, but the seeds of doubt that Miyamoto had planted were still there.

After Chabashira-sensei left the room, Horikita and Hirata made their way to the front.

"Firstly, I'd like to bring the news about each student's individual results during the exam. Please feel free to open your phones and check them."

With a few taps, Horikita used the class group chat to send Class A's results, showing every class member's scores in all eight subjects.

"As you can see, almost every single one of you improved from both the midterm exams and the mock test. If we add Miyamoto-kun's mock test results, our class would actually surpass its previous class average record," Horikita explained.

"Thanks to everyone's hard work, we, as a class, are actually improving. If we keep this up, then catching up to the other classes won't be impossible," added Hirata.

Most of us were satisfied with our individual results. Nothing feels greater than getting rewarded for your hard work.

"Dang... If we didn't have Chemistry and Physics at the same time, then I might've gotten better scores..." grumbled Ken.

"Oh please, Kencchin. You need to stop making excuses," Haruka teased him, grinning smugly. "Right, Miyacchi?"

"Well, at least you didn't score below 60 in any subject," Akito smirked.

"Shut it! The two of you had it easier because you're good at the sciences!"

I looked at my score as my friends bickered.

"This will probably be the last time that I'll score 90 points or above in any subject," I thought.

"Please continue being diligent with your studies. Since you've all grasped the basics of everything fairly well, I doubt future lessons will be hard to learn."

Of course, not everyone was excited to hear the word "study" even in this context. One of the main reasons why some of our classmates' averages were still below 70 was their lack of conscientiousness when it came to studying. They would attend the study sessions, but don't put in the extra effort by continuing to study alone.

Well, that much was to be expected given their habits from middle school. This arrangement was much better than them cramming on their own the night before the exams.

"The next and last thing that I want to talk about would be the state of our class bank."

"Hey, we didn't hear about any of that until that other day!" yelled Ike.

"You had something like that this whole time?" asked Hondou.

"I'm the one managing the class bank, and I'm also the one who explicitly said that it's better to keep the four of you in the dark. Kouenji-kun is an exception since it won't really matter whether we ask him to participate or not," explained Ijuuin.

"What's the supposed to mean, Ijuuin? Are you saying that we can't be trusted?" pressed Yamauchi.

"Yes, exactly. I was afraid that you'd accidentally leak the bank's existence to other classes."

"What the hell, dude?!"

"It doesn't really matter now, though. There's no need to keep it a secret anymore."

"I see. Since Soshi wasn't part of the bank, he wouldn't be prioritized when things get rough. That's cool," Ike narrowed his eyes, looking displeased.

"That's not true, Ike-kun. We were prepared to save any of you, even if you didn't know about the bank..." Hirata explained with a slight grimace.

"Then why didn't you save Soshi?"

"Well, I'm sure you know the reason yourself. You're just in denial if you're still asking that," answered Kikuchi.

"Screw you, Kikuchi. You're just being all smug because the person you want to be saved was saved."

"I'm not smug as much as I'm pissed," Kikuchi sighed while shaking his head. "Miyamoto's involvement with Ryuuken likely made him the target of whoever put those cheat sheets on him. And because of that, an innocent student was caught up in the mess. It could've been anyone, you know?"

"Maybe Mori was also a target," said Hondou. "You and her were involved with Sakayanagi-san during the sports festival, right? Maybe the culprit is trying to get rid of all the traitors in the class."

Kikuchi stopped for a second and pondered Hondou's words.

"Hmm, you have a point... That's also a possibility. I guess that makes me a potential target as well, huh?"

"Wait, what...? You're saying that the guy who expelled Soshi is trying to 'help' us by expelling the traitors? No way, right? They're screwing over our class points!" said Yamauchi.

Horikita clapped her hands twice and stopped the brewing discussion.

"Hirata-kun and I will try to uncover the truth about the person who framed Miyamoto-kun. We don't have many leads, but with the winter break around the corner--"

"As Soshi's friends, we appreciate the thought, Horikita-san..." Hondou's eyes started to look empty and distant. "But it's not like Soshi can return even if we find the person who framed him..."

An air of heavy melancholy loomed over the class.

Even if Miyamoto was a traitor, no one was genuinely happy that he was expelled. Miyamoto wasn't a star student, but he didn't hold the class back. And he was also friends with almost everyone.

Like with Kikuchi and Mori's involvement with Sakayanagi, the class instantly assumed that Miyamoto was being forced to betray the class. No one expected him to have actually turned his back on us.

So, there was a huge emphasis on the "why".

"This class is going downhill!"

Hearing that sent chills down everyone's spines. Reality was catching up, and they had to face it.

"It is unfortunate. I'm sure none of us here wanted him to be expelled regardless of whether he betrayed us or not," Seeing the unchanging expressions on Ike and his friends' faces, Horikita felt powerless. "I'm... trying my best to be considerate. I don't really know the right things to say in these types of situations, but I genuinely feel bad about Miyamoto-kun's expulsion."

Her uncharacteristic words surprised the class. Horikita's years of self-isolation caused her lack of social skills and understanding. Her

aloof demeanor and serious tone give everyone the impression that she is an arrogant person who lacks empathy. So, with Horikita showing an empathetic and vulnerable side, the class started to see her in a new light.

Whether it was intentional or not-- only she knows.

"We get it, Horikita-san. I'm sorry," said Hondou. "Let's stand down for now, Kanji, Haruki..."

Ike and Yamauchi also started to feel bad after seeing the downhearted look on Horikita's face.

"Sorry, we'll shut up now..."

Hirata, who would usually say something before things got to this point, remained silent. Even if he considered all the reasons, it was still very hard for someone like him to accept that one of his classmates got expelled.

The girls, who were actually fond of Horikita, glared at the three boys.

"So, Horikita-san. You were saying something about the bank, right?" Karuizawa raised her hand and urged Horikita to continue about the previous topic.

Horikita tried to regain her composure. She silently cleared her throat and addressed Ijuuin.

His other ID was "S01T001100" and we often referred to him as "Student #1100" for short.

"Ijuuin-kun came up with a plan to make a class bank. I'm sure everyone already knows that apart from the ones who aren't included. The main purpose was to stack up private points that could be used for emergencies. For example, we can use these points to pay for lacking points in written exams."

Horikita turned around and started writing on the board, prompting Hirata, who'd also slightly recovered, to continue the explanation.

"Each student included in the bank should deposit at least 50,000 points a month. And the ones who received rewards for the Zodiac Exam must deposit large a portion of those rewards. Based on the calculations, we had more than enough class points to afford depositing these amounts. So until now, no one has really complained."

"Well... We had so much money that we didn't even know how to spend them," said Shinohara.

"Right? Like, at first, it seemed unreal to me-- that amount of points..." Satou spoke as she looked at her phone.

"I'm honestly glad that I put my points inside the bank. At least they were used to save someone," said Ichihashi.

"Yeah... I can already imagine myself spending it on stupid stuff if

I had it all," followed Azuma.

If a student from our class adds up everything they'd acquired from the first day of school until today, the total would likely exceed 1,000,000 private points. A normal high school student can't possibly spend all of them without being wasteful on purpose. And even with the amount of private points that we were expected to give, all of us most likely still had 6-figure balances in our accounts.

"According to Ijuuin-kun, we have 500,000 points left in the bank. I'm sure things can get tough again in the future, so I want us to stock up on points again. However, our class points went down by a lot... Would everyone still be willing to deposit the same amount?" asked Hirata.

Looking at their expressions, Hirata and Horikita already expected them to say no. At this point in time, it is reasonable to adjust the amount of contributions given the storm we just endured.

"Isn't it fine? We still have tons of money, anyway," Ken shrugged.

His answer caused Hirata to blink in astonishment.

"I thought you were going ask us to raise our deposits. I personally don't have a problem with that either," Ueno said lazily.

"50,000 is fine. Our spending had probably significantly slowed down ever since we got used to our life here. I mean, that's how it was for me, at least..." added Keisei.

To their surprise, most of our classmates were in favor of keeping the monthly deposits as is.

"Yousuke-kun~!" Karuizawa called out to Hirata in her usual girly voice. "Now that Ike-kun and his friends know about the class bank, they shouldn't be able to get any benefits from it unless they contribute properly!"

Her delivery was sweet and affectionate, but her words were basically a death sentence.

"Woah there..." Hondou uttered reflexively.

"W-What the hell, Karuizawa?! You're out to get us again!" followed Yamauchi.

Ike thought about it carefully before giving his response. I glanced at Shinohara, and she was staring at him with a subtle look of worry in her eyes.

"I think that's fair..." he said. "I don't wanna get expelled, so if that's the rule then I'll follow it."

His words made Hondou agree with little hesitation while Yamauchi had a look of slight reluctance.

"Well, I'm the same, so sure..." Hondou nodded.

"What's the point of holding on to your money if you get expelled, Haruki?" Ike asked, turning to his friend. "You have more points

than me because of the Zodiac Exam. I should be hesitating more than you."

"I-I guess..."

"How many points do you have left, Ike-kun?" asked Horikita.

"I have around 448,000 points left," he answered after looking at his phone.

Everyone started to murmur. That meant that he'd spent at least 400,000 points in the last nine months. Those remaining girls who joined at the beginning of December were asked to deposit at least 450,000 points, so he'd basically be in the negative if he decides to comply now.

"I know, it's not a lot. I bought so many pointless stuff that I'm not even using anymore..." The regret in Ike's voice made everyone go silent. "But I don't think it's too late for me to save up again. I'll definitely give 500,000 points in January."

Now that Ike had said that much, none of our classmates could really say anything.

"Alright, I'm in. Investing 500,000 points sounds a lot, but it doesn't really matter if everyone else is doing it." Hondou tapped away at his phone as he checked his balance.

"Hey, Yamauchi-kun, what about you?" Satou crossed her arms and asked.

"I'll do it, I'll do it! It's 500,000 points, right? I have more than enough!" Yamauchi hurriedly agreed.

"Ara, 500,000 points? Aren't you miscalculating something, Yamauchi-kun?" smiled Matsushita.

"W-What do you mean?" Yamauchi acted dumb, but he must've realized it as well.

"You got some **cough** undeserved **cough** rewards from the Zodiac Exam, right? You should probably put it in the bank as well," teased Onizuka. (1)

"Kiyoshi, you bastard... You're one to talk!"

"Haha, I *am* one to talk! I got 125,000 points from the Zodiac Exam, same as you, but I put 120,000 inside the bank. You should do the same!"

"Don't be too harsh, Kiyoshi. We all know Yamauchi would run out of points if he did that. The guy can spend more in nine months than I can in three years," Minami (Setsuya) joined in and took a jab at him.

The pressure from the two and the appalled stares of everyone else were too much for Yamauchi.

"Fine! I'll put 600,000 points in the bank next month! Whatever!"

"Ohh, what a generous person," Makida clapped semi-sarcastically.

"Don't force yourself, dude. You might have to start going for those free meals next month if you do that," Minami (Hakuo) chuckled.

"Shut it! I know a bunch of second-years who want to buy my stuff for a lower price! I'll definitely have enough for good food!" countered Yamauchi.

"By good food, I hope you don't mean natto three times a day..."

Soon enough, everyone started laughing.

Horikita sighed before making a tenuous smile that nobody noticed. She glanced at Hirata who absent-mindedly watched the scene.

"I agree with what Karuizawa-san had suggested. Now that the existence of the class bank is known to everyone, it's only fair that each student is required to contribute if they want to benefit from it," she declared, facing them. "For your deposits next month, you'll have to talk to Ijuuin-kun."

"I'm afraid you won't be an exception to this, Kouenji-kun." Hirata addressed the only student who didn't care about any of these matters.

"Fret not. That amount of money is insignificant to someone like me. Consider it a donation or charity, if you will."

His response shocked everyone. Even if Kouenji's attitude was the same as ever, his decision to cooperate with the class bank meant that he was afraid of the consequences if he did otherwise-- or at least, that's what they thought after ignoring Kouenji's choice of words.

Moments later, the bell finally rang. Since the discussion was pretty much over, Horikita and Hirata swiftly dismissed the class.

Miyamoto's expulsion certainly left an impact on us in more ways than one, but the class was intact. That in itself was already a big achievement in my opinion. As long as the class didn't crumble, there would always be a way to stand up again. As leaders, that's what Horikita and Hirata ought to believe.

Author's Notes:

The latter four subjects aren't stated in the canon, so I'm just using what I know about the subjects that are typically assigned by the Japanese Ministry of Education for the high school curriculum.

Here's the data on Ijuuin's class bank.

P.S. - I also tried making a hypothetical calculation on Ichinose's class, and the canon amount of private points they saved up around the time Volume 10 happened was actually pretty reasonable if Ichinose used similar methods.

For those who are curious, here is the current state of wealth of each student in Horikita's class as of December 1st.

*As you can see, none of them are absolutely lacking in money. The average monthly allowance of a Japanese high school student is around **8,000** to **10,000** yen. If we add the fact that they are living on their own, we can generously bump that up to **12,000** to **15,000** yen a month. So realistically, they can easily survive until the end of December with only **70,000** to **140,000** points WITHOUT trying to live frugally.*

In fact, the bulk of their spending happened in the first two months when they had to stock up on resources and buy room appliances and decorations as students who just started living in dormitories. Also, Kiyotaka's move to buy the S-System explanation in April heavily influenced their money-spending tendencies in a positive way.

P.S. - There's Ike and Yamauchi who spent 400k+ on games and shit. Then there's Kouenji who spent 600k+ on self-care products and dates.

1. Onizuka be like:

Vol. 7: Chapter 2.2 - A Hundred Percent is Not Enough

Note: You might want to reread "Vol. 6: Chapter 3.1 - Inching Closer" for better context.

Sitting on my bed, the girl named Kushida Kikyou did not wear her mask. The two of us faced each other, similar to how we did *that night*. Her true self sat in front of me with piercing eyes that saw nothing but the malice of humanity.

"Ryuuen-kun knows about my past," she said.

Her smile was nonexistent, and her eyes were filled with darkness. However, her allure didn't wane at all. It was the opposite of the angelic girl that everyone dreams of befriending.

"I see... Saying that that's troubling for you would be a big understatement," I replied.

The cold and detached Kikyou was something that only Horikita and I have ever had the luxury of interacting with. But-- well, it was arguable whether a normal person would consider it a luxury.

"That's right. Depending on what he knows, my life in this school could very much come to an end."

This Kikyou drew me in. Was it the mystery? Was it the contrast? It might be a combination of both. Right now, it's something that I've only personally felt and observed. Horikita's indifference to Kikyou wasn't a good basis for me to reflect upon, so my impressions would probably stay that way for a long while.

"Did you gather enough information? I thought you were trying to find out what Ryuuen was planning," I asked, prepared for what was to come.

"Stop it, Kiyotaka-kun! I get it already!" she snapped.

Kikyou's hands visibly trembled.

"There's no way I can accomplish something like that on my own! I admit it! I was trying to test you! I wanted to see if you'll readily offer your help to me..." She looked like she didn't want to continue talking, but she had no choice. "I wanted to see if I... was important to you..."

I remember the conversation we had. It might've been out of desperation, but it wasn't the right move. Even Kikyou realized that.

"If I was important to you, then I could've manipulated you. I could've used you..." Her hoarse voice laid her frustration bare. "I wanted to control you... but I was stupid for even trying to have that line of thought..."

"You finally said it."

"What...?"

"That's what you wanted, Kiky-- control," I said.

She bit her lips in aggravation before nodding in agreement.

"Maybe you're right... but I already knew that it was futile. I don't know why I..."

I crossed my arms and sighed, prompting Kiky to look at me.

"It's simple," I said. "It's because you never trusted me."

If she did, losing control wouldn't have been an issue.

"I never... trusted you...?"

Kiky looked understandably confused. We've been working together for the past year under many labels-- friends, classmates, best friends, allies-- you name it. The amount of trust that she'd shown in my abilities was similar to that of Horikita's. And because of that, the two were also similar in another aspect...

They didn't trust me as a person.

"Maybe you think you did, but it's not that easy, especially for someone like you. For the longest time in your life, you never trusted anyone. I was probably the only person who was close to gaining at least some of your trust."

"How would you know that...? I... always believed in you. That's not a lie!"

"You believed me in a way that meets your expectations. And even if I did surpass those expectations, you'd simply adjust your image of me accordingly. You never truly believed that I would do something way beyond what you've already seen... because if you do, you're basically admitting that you can't calculate the outcomes of my actions," I explained. "And if that happens, you'd *totally* lose control."

In fact, this was one of the many reasons why I didn't disclose some of my plans to Kiky. I didn't want her to see an extent of my abilities that greatly exceeded her expectations. If I did, she might panic and there would've been a much higher chance of her turning against me.

I showed her just enough to make her docile, but not enough to freak her out to the point of irrationality. That's also why I never told her the whole truth about how I managed to record her voice on the rooftop. And of course, believing someone doesn't necessarily mean that you trust them.

Kiky looked dumbfounded, but she didn't dismiss my words.

"Based on your reaction, you don't seem to be aware of it. But your own mind won't let you lose the battle for control. When I exposed you, you lost your control over the situation and with it; your will to fight. I pushed you down to the pits of despair."

Bringing up those memories caused Kikyou to make bitter expressions.

"When I said that I wanted us to become allies, you couldn't just accept it."

She hated losing, but she lost so badly that her opponent had the luxury of offering peace.

"In the end, you got back some of the control I'd taken from you because we stopped being enemies. But if you were in my position, you'd never do the same thing."

She wanted to be loved by everyone, but that's just the extension of what she truly feels.

In order for Kushida Kikyou to get what she wants, she must first get what she *needs*. And what she needed was *control*. And since she trusted no one, she wanted to control everyone.

Horikita, for example, was targeted like an archnemesis before they even had a conversation. It wasn't a normal reaction for someone who just wanted to keep their secret. That's because Horikita's very existence threatened Kikyou's otherwise perfect plans. And no matter how small of a threat she was, for someone who wanted *absolute* control, Kikyou must get rid of her.

Of course, Horikita's attitude didn't help either. That's why I put in the extra work to change her a little.

"I figured that it wouldn't be enough. You'd eventually want more."

"But I already knew that I can't beat you! I wanted to coexist with you! I even became dependent on you! I would never b-"

"You did think about betraying me."

Back when Ryuen managed to record our conversation, Kikyou admitted that she thought about changing sides. While she didn't go through with it, the cracks in her so-called "trust" were easily revealed.

"I... I did..." Kikyou said, sounding disheartened. "But I resolved myself to trust you after that! When I tried to test you, it was a moment of weakness... I'm not trying to make an excuse, Kiyotakakun. I really don't want to betray you!"

After watching me up close, I doubt Kikyou would recklessly try to betray me. However...

"Do you really mean that?" I asked. "Or are you just afraid that I might betray *you* instead?"

It was a question that Kikyou would normally expect, but no

matter how much a person expected something, if they didn't know how to deal with it, it's all meaningless.

Kikyou stiffened and her eyes wandered in thought. A couple of seconds later, contrary to her initial reaction, her breathing started to relax. Eventually, she turned to me.

The tears she tried to hold in began to flow.

"Yes..."

And as she locked her gaze into my eyes... Kikyou smiled. It was the smile of someone who'd finally surrendered.

"Please don't betray me, Kiyotaka-kun..."

Kikyou couldn't keep her eyes open as the emotions took over. Her cries became more audible until she couldn't help it anymore.

"Please... don't..."

She desperately tried to wipe her tears with her dainty hands, but it barely did anything.

I stood up and sat next to her. Without hesitation, I embraced Kikyou as gently as I could.

She continued crying, and her tears dampened my uniform. Eventually, her hands clung to me as she buried her face in my chest.

Kikyou felt vulnerable-- more vulnerable than she ever did. No matter how cunning and calculating she is, in the end, she's just a normal girl.

I slowly caressed her head and back.

After a while, she finally started calming down.

"Say... Do you remember what I said during the sports festival?" I asked.

Kikyou didn't answer with words. She kept her face hidden from me while slowly wrapping her arms around my body. She did remember, but I'll say it again anyway.

"I told you... I'll protect you."

Her body trembled but she stopped herself from crying again.

"Can you promise me?"

"Do you mean it?"

"Are you telling the truth?"

She couldn't find the words to say knowing that none of them would do anything.

Kikyou didn't ask for my reassurance. She didn't need it anymore. This time, she trusted me.

"Can we stay like this for a while?" she asked, her voice slightly muffled by my clothes.

"Well, I did say that I would spoil you a lot once the exam was

over."

Her embrace tightened significantly. Kikyou could try to hide her face all she wanted, but it wouldn't matter if the reddish glow of her blush reached her ears.

We stayed in each other's arms for who knows how long. Hopefully, the comfort she once felt beside me had come back.

In the end, Kikyou didn't ask about the bugs. Maybe she forgot. Maybe she stopped worrying about it. Well, it doesn't matter anymore. Those recordings would soon lose their value.

After all, I won the game of trust.

Vol. 7: Chapter 3.1 - Being Targeted is Part of the Job

The weekend passed and the last week before winter break was finally upon us.

Ike and his group gave me weird looks as soon as they got inside the classroom. It was easy to deduce why, but I'll have to wait until the end of today's classes before I can truly find out.

After the last bell, the teacher grabbed their things and walked out of the classroom. All of us were ready to leave too, but...

"Everyone, do you have a minute?" Ike raised his voice to gather the class's attention.

"What's the matter, Ike-kun?" Hirata asked.

Ike scanned the room, and apart from Kouenji who nonchalantly stepped out of the room while acting like he didn't hear anything, everyone was actually curious about what he had to say.

"Ryuuen reached out to us yesterday."

The reactions were immediate and the murmurs rose to a clamor.

A gashing sound of metal made everyone turn to a certain girl. She noisily moved her chair and sat back down which was a contrast to her usual elegance. Horikita Suzune made her stance clear. She was ready to listen.

Soon, everyone followed suit. Hondou and Yamauchi brought a Bluetooth speaker in front and placed it on top of the teacher's desk.

"I'll let you guys listen for yourselves," said Ike.

Everyone started to look confused. They thought Ike would talk about what he and Ryuuen had discussed. Of course, the smart ones thought that maybe Ike and the other two recorded the conversation, but they instantly rejected that notion after taking their usual stupidity in mind.

After a brief second, the Bluetooth speaker started producing noise. It made scratching sounds before footsteps were finally heard. Of course, it didn't take long until those footsteps stopped.

"I got the test questions."

Everyone instantly tensed up after hearing a familiar voice. They thought they'd never hear his voice again, but they were wrong.

"Kukuku, good work, Miyamoto."

The person who mentioned his name was none other than

Ryuuen.

Suddenly, the mic started making static noises as if it was rubbing against something just like earlier.

"Hey! What are you-?!"

"Ohoho, what do we have here?"

Ryuuen's voice became much louder and clearer. He must've taken the bug from Miyamoto.

"H-How did you know-?!"

"I'm not dumb, that's why. Well, I'll be taking this for now."

"Shit..."

The mic made static noises before sounding a bit muffled once again. It seems like Ryuuen kept it inside his pocket.

"Damn it..."

"So? What about the other thing I asked you to do?"

Miyamoto answered with silence.

"I don't like repeating myself, Miyamoto."

"Tsk... Yeah, I picked a fight with Ayanokouji just like you asked. The whole class saw it happen. Even some of your classmates got to take a peek since our door was wide open. You can ask them if you don't believe me."

"Is that so? Don't worry, I believe you." Ryuuen replied before chuckling. *"Kukuku... I wonder how Ayanokouji feels about you now?"*

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"He might think you're an enemy. I wouldn't be surprised if he suddenly wanted to expel you."

Suddenly, I felt some eyes in my direction.

"What in the world are you talking about? Expelling me over something like that is going overboard... And Ayanokouji won't do that, cuz' if he did, then the whole class would be in trouble."

Ryuuen audibly snickered.

"Interesting. Let's set the matter with you getting expelled aside. I'm curious about what you said. Do you really think Ayanokouji cares if your class gets in 'trouble'?"

"That's... what I'd like to think. I mean, he carried us to Class A, after all."

"Kukuku. Perhaps you're misunderstanding something, Miyamoto."

Miyamoto fell silent once more.

"I know how Ayanokouji thinks. To him, the rank system is just a game. It's all for his own entertainment. I mean, just look at him now. The moment you guys made it to Class A, he dipped and started lazing around," he declaimed. "Ayanokouji had already won. If he really did care about your class, he would've stayed as your leader until the gap was wide enough that Class B wouldn't be able to catch up until we graduate."

"W-Well... I guess you have a point."

"Oh? You're starting to sound convinced."

"It makes sense. You claimed that our class would just continue losing, and you said that Sakayanagi-san from Class B thought the same. And even though Ayanokouji helps out like a normal honor student, he doesn't seem to care as much as he did before..."

"Heh! I'm sure he wants to do even less than what an honor student does." Ryuuken's tone instantly went from relaxed to serious. "If I were you, I'd be careful about getting expelled by someone like him."

"Ugh... Well, I wouldn't have to worry if you didn't set me up like this! You just went ahead and made him angry at me!"

Ryuuken suddenly laughed out loud.

"Haha! The only reason why I wanted you to do that was so I could mess with Ayanokouji a little bit. It's not up to me whether he wants to expel you or not."

"Ugh, whatever. Ayanokouji won't be able to expel me. I mean, what can he even do?"

"Meh, who knows?"

"And, well... He shouldn't be that petty, right?"

"Petty? C'mon, Miyamoto. You're the third traitor in your class. And unlike Kikuchi and Mori, who Sakayanagi used, you're actually willing to work with me. He doesn't need to be petty to get fed up with snakes. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to expel all three of you."

"That's absurd...! And you don't know that!"

"That's right, Miyamoto. I don't know. Nobody really knows."

"Tch... Damn it."

Only a couple of Miyamoto's heavy footsteps could be heard before all the sound disappeared.

"..."

The class was silent. Some of them don't know how to react while others don't know if it was even necessary to react.

"I see. I get the implications, but that's where it all ends." Horikita gave her comment with a sigh.

"What...?" said Ike.

"But that's evidence right there," Yamauchi insisted.

"Evidence? What's the evidence?" asked Karuizawa.

"These are just statements from Ryuuken-kun and Miyamoto-kun. I don't feel like they could be considered as evidence." Hirata pitched in to defend me as well.

"It might not be solid evidence, but it's pretty suspicious how their conversation fitted with what actually happened..." replied Hondou.

"Miyamoto was working with Ryuuken, right? This whole thing could be staged," said Ken.

"I don't think so. That would mean Soshi knew that he was going to get expelled. Do you think he'd happily follow such a plan?" Hondou struck back.

"Well... No..."

"Ryoutarou, Haruki, we're not here to push this issue anymore," Ike asked his friends to stand down before facing the class. "Everyone, we're not here to make you go through all of the allegations again. Whether Ayanokouji was involved in getting Soshi expelled or not doesn't really matter anymore. We have no concrete evidence, and Soshi is not coming back."

"Then what's the point of all this...?" asked Shinohara.

"Well, we thought the class should know. It's not like Ryuen told us to hide it, and even if he did, there's no way we're following that guy's orders..." Ike shifted his gaze on me. "But more importantly, I want an answer to certain a question... Do you care about this class, Ayanokouji? Soshi asked you the same thing, but you didn't answer him properly."

"Why are you asking such a thing, Kanji-kun?"

Before I could respond, Kikyou asked him a question instead.

"What...? Well, it's for the sake of the class, isn't it? I'm sure everyone wants to know as well."

Kikyou's clenched fists were trembling. She wanted to speak her mind, but doing so would most likely reveal some of her true nature and disillusion many people. It probably took everything she had just to *not* emphasize the word "you" in her question.

"Are you kidding me right now, Ike?" Kikuchi's voice reverberated inside the classroom.

His casual and carefree behavior was nowhere to be seen as it was replaced with the intensity he showed during his argument with Miyamoto.

"For the sake of the class? Seriously? Can you get any more entitled?"

Posed with such words, Ike glared at him.

"If you're saying that it's for the class, then that would include you, right? But why the hell would you give a shit if Ayanokouji cares about the class or not?" Kikuchi asked.

"Why? It's obviously because someone who doesn't give their all for the class shouldn't be--"

"Are you deaf, Ike? I asked why *you* and your friends would give a shit. Only a handful of people here are actually qualified to say what you were about to say. Why the hell would you care if Ayanokouji gives his all or not? Are *you* doing your best for the class? You and Yamauchi are the laziest students of Class A. Even after all the painstaking efforts that Horikita-san and Hirata had

made to help our studies, the two of you still can't score a total of at least 465 points for eight subjects. I probably suck more than the two of you when it comes to academics cuz' I've been that way ever since I was a kid, but I didn't laze around this time. My overall score in the Paper Shuffle exam was 560 points because of that." Kikuchi paused as he observed Ike and the other two.

Seeing their silence, he continued.

"I would understand if the person complaining right now was Horikita-san or Kushida-san or Hirata or Yukimura. Struggling students like Sakura-san, Inogashira-san, or Sudou can also voice those complaints. Why? They're *all* doing their best for the class. They have the right to feel frustration if a classmate is lazing around." Kikuchi narrowed his eyes and scoffed. "But what about you guys? Are you taking your studies seriously? Have you joined any sports club to improve your athletics and contribute more to the class?"

The three of them averted their eyes.

"Thought so. Miyamoto was the same so he also had no right to complain about Horikita-san losing to other leaders. He got carried to the top by Ayanokouji and he couldn't stand the thought of coming back down. You guys are just the same."

Some of our other classmates were indirectly hit by his words.

"And even if you wanna complain about Ayanokouji stepping down, he's still contributing to the class more than all of you four combined, including Miyamoto. If the class is losing, it's certainly not because of them. It's because of people like *you*."

This time, it was probably an intentional strike at those who were guilty since Kikuchi used the phrase "people like you" instead of just the word "you".

"Ah, is that so? Well, I guess you're right. Sorry, Ayanokouji." Ike, who was clearly upset, replied sarcastically.

He tucked his bag on his shoulders and quickly walked out of the classroom.

"K-Kanji, wait!" Yamauchi glared at Kikuchi before chasing after Ike.

"Man... You really dug your claws deep, didn't you, Kikuchi? Well, what you said was right," Hondou sighed before bowing and facing everyone. "Everyone, we were wrong. We were not and will never be in a position to complain... But please understand where this came from. We're just upset about losing our friend..."

Hondou's simple but effective speech instantly garnered pity from the class. The backlash that they would receive, especially Ike, will most likely be reduced to a minimum.

"Um... Horikita-san had already said this, but I'm sure none of us

here are *not* upset that one of our classmates got expelled..." Kikyou stood up in a calculatingly hurried manner. "But for the sake of the class, and hopefully, for the sake of Miyamoto-kun as well... I hope we can move on and become stronger!"

Responses and murmurs of agreement ensued. Kikyou smiled and thanked them in a very heartfelt way.

"Well said, Kikyou-chan. Then, I'll go ahead and chase after my friends now!" Hondou briskly stepped out of the classroom, leaving everyone behind.

"What a hassle," Horikita commented. "That's especially true for you."

"Being targeted is part of the job. You'll have to get used to it too," I replied.

This time, Kikuchi had cemented himself as another central figure of the class. He's not athletic nor is he gifted in academics, so a lot of our classmates can relate to someone like him more. As his influence grows, I'm sure the class will become even more formidable given his abilities in certain areas.

I guess my plan to use Kikuchi to deal with him in the future should be viable, after all.

Author's Notes:

Kikuchi:

Character: Kaworu Nagisa from Evangelion

Vol. 7: Chapter 4.1 - Untapped Potential

The next day, the class atmosphere remained relatively stable despite the previous altercation. As usual, I didn't do anything but stay silent despite being one of the main subjects.

I observed how the different groups within the class interacted and noticed a rift between the guys. Kikuchi and Ike, with his group, ignored each other which was natural given how estranged they've become. This had a large effect on how the other guys acted around them. Onizuka, Makida, and Minami (Hakuo), who were in Kikuchi's group didn't seem to ignore Ike and the other two. Obviously, Kikuchi wouldn't tell them to do something like that, but they didn't feel as comfortable around the other group either.

And for the girls... Well, they didn't really have to navigate around the situation, so they acted normally for the most part.

"It's nothing new." Sugawara patted my shoulder. "Fights between cliques happen all the time, remember? The only difference is how high-profile this is."

"I guess you're right," I solemnly agreed.

We took our PE class at some point. Higashiyama-sensei, knowing my running capabilities, made an offer.

"I already know how fast you can run, Ayanokouji. I can exempt your attendance for today's class," he smiled.

"Ohh, thanks, Sensei."

"By the way, if you're interested, Kimura-sensei's offer is still up for grabs."

Ah, of course...

"Sorry, but I'd have to decline. I have no interest in track and field..."

"Sigh... I see. It's a shame, but I'll tell him that your answer hasn't changed."

I've been getting offers from different clubs after the sports festival. A lot of the teachers were even saying that I got scouted by professional trainers who happened to attend.

"Please do," I bowed slightly.

Well, if I can go back to the classroom to get some sleep, then I'd gladly do so.

"Sensei... Can I also--"

"Shut it, Ueno! You can barely finish a lap with your lazy ass! Now go out there and run before I give you a failing mark!"

Ueno groaned in agony before jogging back with everyone. He was a fairly competent student when it came to academics, but like Yukimura, physical activities were the bane of his existence.

Running out on the racing track in the middle of December was brutal, so we used the Gymnasium. That said, the temperature was still significantly lower than what we were used to. The cool morning breeze made us feel a little bit lethargic.

Feeling relaxed, I took my time walking and enjoyed the scenery around the main building.

It certainly gave me a moment to ponder about myself.

I wonder how much time had passed since I stepped down as the class's leader... To be completely honest, it didn't feel long at all. It would often come up in conversations among my classmates that no one has had the chance to even forget about it.

It was pretty inconvenient given my objective of making Horikita the official leader.

"A leader, huh...?"

My initial purpose for coming to this school was to run away and live like a normal high school student. However, after anticipating the kind of learning environment it has, I figured that testing myself might be worthwhile.

I was mistaken.

Even with the innate disadvantage of being placed in Class D, I easily managed to reach the top.

"That's why I needed a bigger handicap," I muttered under my breath.

I wonder if purchasing the information on the S-System back in April was a mistake. Well, it certainly made things a lot easier, and in the long run, the foundation I've established will benefit the entire class... But what I didn't anticipate enough was the lack of personal growth for some of my classmates. 'Goes to show that I still have a long way to go when it comes to understanding others, I guess.

Living peacefully and doing a Self-Test... Those are two completely different roads, and realistically, I could only choose one. But because I stepped down, I managed to walk on the road of solace, albeit briefly.

After a while, I finally changed my clothes in the locker room and returned to the classroom.

I checked my phone and sifted through my messages. According to what Kikyou had told me so far, Ryuen's should strike right

before winter break. If that's the case, it should be safe to say everything would've ended by the time Christmas arrives.

And so, I sent a message to Chabashira-sensei with that date in particular as the only content. That should ease the tension for the higher-ups of Sakuragaoka Academy. At least now, they know when their official website can be changed back to normal.

"I should probably borrow a new set of volumes from Ijuuin after I finish reading one last classical book," I thought.

"Oh, Ayanokouji." Kikuchi acknowledged my presence as soon as he entered the classroom.

"Hey, Kikuchi."

"I saw you got in. You just got here?" he asked.

"Yeah, I kinda loitered around before coming back," I replied.

"Did the class finish?"

There was still about thirty minutes before the next subject.

"Hmm, not really. A few of our classmates are still running. Sudou and the other athletic ones who finished early were free to do whatever they wanted as long they stayed inside the gymnasium. When I was done, I personally asked Higashiyama-sensei if I could go back."

"Well, you did finish early. I'm not surprised that Higashiyama-sensei permitted your request."

"Exactly," he smirked. "I pushed myself really hard to finish the needed amount of laps. Sensei was in a good mood after seeing me run desperately and happily gave the okay. I'm honestly still out of strength right now..."

Given that it was Kikuchi, there was no point in trying to be indirect. There should only be one reason why he wanted to go back.

"Did you want to talk about something?" I asked.

"You must be wondering why I'm still on your side even with all the implications that you were the one who expelled Miyamoto, and that Nene's expulsion was part of your plan."

Kikuchi's smile lingered, but the look in his eyes was different. It was the same kind of gaze that made anyone feel the need to pay attention to his every word.

"At the very least, I don't think it's simply because you believe that I didn't do it."

"You're right. I don't *believe* you didn't do it. I *know* you didn't do it," he shrugged. "In fact, I also know that you were the one who saved Nene. That's why I'm thankful."

Since he went so far as to claim that I saved Mori, he must've done some digging.

"I see. If that's the case, then it's convenient for me."

Kikuchi chuckled while shaking his head, probably amused by our conversation.

We could continue probing each other's responses, but unless one of us yields, this conversation was headed to no man's land. And as expected, Kikuchi needed answers more than I did.

"Alright, fine. I give up."

Kikuchi slightly spread and raised his arms in submission.

"Just a few days before Miyamoto got expelled, the remaining girls who weren't included in the class bank finally joined in. They were the reason why we barely had enough points to save Nene. At first, I thought she got lucky. But after thinking about it, it couldn't have been just a coincidence."

Kikuchi took Horikita's seat as he started explaining.

"Miyamoto apologized to you during the submission day, at a time when Ryuuen was busy dealing with Horikita-san and Hirata. Just based on that, I already thought about Miyamoto and Ryuuen not having rock-solid cooperation. The recording from yesterday confirmed it for me. Miyamoto apologized because Ryuuen made him scared of you."

"What does that have to do with me saving Mori?"

"That in itself has nothing to do with it. The relation comes from the timing," he answered. "The class bank was managed by Ijuuin, so I asked him why he suddenly asked the remaining girls to join. He said that he simply thought it was finally time... but that didn't really make any sense. We were too busy preparing for the Paper Shuffle exam to worry about the current state of the class bank."

"But it did make sense eventually," I said.

"Yeah... Ijuuin knew that we needed at least 20 million private points to save someone from expulsion. He knew that someone might get expelled... or someone told him."

"So you're saying that I'm the one who told him?"

"I'm pretty sure that's the case," Kikuchi smiled confidently. "Horikita-san submitted the test questions right after classes ended. Miyamoto apologized to you around that time, and you guys should've talked for a few minutes. I asked Ijuuin to show me his call history, and he readily complied. As expected, there was a call between the two of you that matched the timing."

"Is it that strange for me to call Ijuuin?"

"I knew you guys were friends, so a call wasn't that out of place. But something about your call history with each other stuck out like a sore thumb. All of the recent calls were made by Ijuuin. This particular call was the *only* call made by you. And if I remember correctly, you were supposed to be hanging out with Miyake and your friends. What else would be your reason for suddenly calling

Ijuuin at this point in time?"

"Something would to come mind, right? Ijuuin and I are both otakus, after all."

"I figured that Ijuuin and Professor are already kind of part of your group, so you should've known that you couldn't hang out with either of them that day. It would've been weird if you were trying to invite him. And if you're talking about light novels or manga, I already confirmed it with Ijuuin. On that day, you had nothing to return nor did you borrow anything from him."

He's just as brilliant as I imagined him to be.

"I guess you've figured it out."

"So you're admitting that I'm right?" Kikuchi raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I was the one who instructed Ijuuin about the class bank."

"But... that means you also knew that someone was bound to get expelled..."

"Not really." I shook my head. "I just felt like something was up. I didn't really know if anyone was at risk of expulsion, but I wanted to prepare for the worst-case scenario."

Of course, that was a lie. I already had a good guess about the entirety of Ryuuen and Sakayanagi's plan ever since the Paper Shuffle exam was announced.

"So you didn't know who sabotaged Miyamoto?"

"Not yet," I replied.

"You're trying to find them?" Kikuchi asked, sounding pleasantly surprised.

"You could say that."

"Heh, so I guess Ike's accusations were baseless then?" he smirked.

"Not necessarily. I mean, even if I didn't care about the class, I still care about myself. The person who got Miyamoto expelled was also trying to get me in trouble. I expect them to attack me again, so it's better to prepare."

"Haha, you're right about that."

Kikuchi's light-hearted expression slowly turned serious.

"You know, after Sakayanagi-san blackmailed me and Nene, I finally realized how vulnerable everyone is. I thought we'd be fine as long as we did our best-- as long as we didn't trouble anyone," he said. "But despite that, Nene was still targeted. I vowed to be extra careful since then, but it didn't even take that long until *this* happened."

It was logical for students who didn't have the best reputation like Yamauchi or troublemakers like Kouenji to be worried. Ken was also targeted by Ryuuen for having a short fuse. However, innocent students like Mori or Kikuchi were different. They weren't a liability

to the class nor were they troublemakers. They shouldn't have that same worry.

"Well, I don't think the enemy cares about any of that."

"Exactly. It was out of Nene's control. She's strong, but at the end of the day, she's just a normal girl. Nene isn't like you, or Horikita-san, or Hirata. Even if we all live in the same world, we're not fighting on the same battlefield."

"But the battlefields are all adjacent to each other, and Sakayanagi forcefully dragged Mori to a place where she didn't belong. Anyone is susceptible to that."

After stepping down, I wanted to enter that simpler battlefield where I could try to live like a regular student. Unfortunately, Ryuuen and Sakayanagi wanted me to come back to where they were-- back to the battlefield where I once was.

"Yeah... We learned that the hard way."

Kikuchi's wry smile was followed by a long sigh. He faced me and looked straight into my eyes.

"I've decided to stop standing around the same place, Ayanokouji. I'm going to where you guys are, and I want you to let me join your side."

"I see... And your objective is to protect Mori, huh?"

Kikuchi's actions were driven by feelings, and those feelings were more intense than I could ever imagine.

"Oh, well, yeah, there's that. As long as Nene wants to live her life as a normal member of the class, then sure, I'll help her keep things that way."

However, it seems like I misunderstood.

"Nene's becoming really close with Horikita-san, so she might want to join this side later. I won't make any suggestions, but if that's what she wants, then I can't really do anything about it," he shrugged.

"Oh, I thought your main goal was to keep Mori from getting exposed to danger again..."

"What? Hahaha, you're not wrong, but that's not the entirety of it," Kikuchi laughed.

I was sorely mistaken. Kikuchi's feelings were strong, but they weren't *all* about love or romance.

"You're misunderstanding something, Ayanokouji." His smile resembled that of a wise teacher. "My world doesn't revolve around Nene just because I'm in love with her, you know?"

At that moment, I understood Kikuchi a little better. I've been so exposed to the romanticized depictions of love in fiction and I've become so accustomed to the young depictions of love from my high school peers that I forgot what the ideal textbook definition of

love meant.

I've read about love in scholarly books before, but I have yet to see a particular concept in practice-- until today. It was the concept of "mature love".

According to psychoanalyst Erich Seligmann Fromm; *"Mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity."*

It was the kind of love that was miles ahead from the perspective of children-- a very mature perspective that respects the autonomy of both parties.

"I'll protect her and I'll try to help her however I can. That's a huge part of why I'm asking this... but more than that, Nene and I have the same goal-- a goal that everyone in this school probably also has."

"You want to graduate in Class A."

Ike, Yamauchi, and the other guys obsess over the pretty girls in our class and the pretty girls in magazines. You can easily discount that as them being teenagers, but those traits can also apply to people we would consider as adults. A crush, a girlfriend, feelings of lust, feelings of infatuation-- those were all kid stuff for Kikuchi.

"Yep," he replied. "My feelings for Nene are separate from that. We're both gonna do our own thing."

Kikuchi has romantic feelings for Mori, and he cares for her. But more than that, Kikuchi treats her as a fellow human being, as an equal-- not a damsel in distress, not a prize to claim, not a flower on top of a hill.

Borrowing Fromm's words, *"In love, the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two."*

In this aspect, no one even comes close to the person named Kikuchi Eita-- not Hirata, not even Kikyuu. If his personality was more 'out there', he would probably be more popular than someone like me or Hirata. As a fellow guy, I can certainly learn a lot more from him.

"But right now, that's being hindered by the schemes of our opponents. Horikita-san and Hirata have too much on their plate, so I want to lessen their burden by getting involved more closely." He nonchalantly changed the topic.

"If that's the case, you should probably talk to Horikita. She's the leader, after all."

To my words, Kikuchi could only chuckle. He leaned back, shifting his gaze to the front of the classroom.

"I'm only asking this out of curiosity. Your answer won't really change how I see you or act around you..." Kikuchi paused before turning back to me. "Do you care about the class, Ayanokouji?"

"Can you answer that question before I do?"

"Of course," he scoffed. "Honestly, I don't care about the *class*. I care about myself and a bunch of people *in* the class. I'll only act for my benefit and their benefit. If my action benefits the entire class as a whole, then so be it."

"How do you judge who to care about?" I asked.

"That's easy. I care about my friends the most. Next on the list would be those who do stuff to benefit the class. And the last ones are the people I find nice," he answered. "It's very categorical which can be a little bit immature, I know. People say that I'm one of the most mature guys around, but I don't think that's the case at all. I may have grounded takes here and there, but I'm certainly not the most mature if I'm letting guys like Ike and Miyamoto annoy the hell out of me."

"I guess that's true... But to be fair, those were the first times that everyone saw you getting worked up."

"That's stress for you," he shrugged. "The girl I like was about to be expelled. Wouldn't it be weird if I *didn't* get worked up?"

At that moment, the sliding door opened.

"We're finally back!" yelled Onizuka.

A wave of people followed suit. There were only a few minutes left before the next subject, so everyone was rushing back to their seats.

"Well, I'm looking forward to working with you more in the future." Kikuchi got up from Horikita's seat.

"It was a good talk, Kikuchi."

"You can call me Eita. I'll call you Kiyotaka from now on," he smiled.

"Got it, Eita."

Author's Notes:

Kiyotaka has found someone whom he can ask for relationship advice... but that's useless if he's not in a relationship! Well, well, well... Maybe that'll change soon.

Vol. 7: Chapter 4.2 - Personal Connection

"Wow~... Sensei let Ayanokouji-kun go back just like that. Lucky him," Mori-san muttered enviously while looking at Ayanokouji-kun.

"Shut it, Ueno! You can barely finish a lap with your lazy ass! Now go out there and run before I give you a failing mark!" Higashiyama-sensei yelled at Ueno-kun as Ayanokouji-kun turned to leave.

So he was exempted from the class, huh?

"Start running your laps! I'll observe and grade your running form to see some progress. However, your speeds will also be graded. I don't care about your elegance if you're a slowpoke!"

"Let's go, Horikita-san?"

"Alright," I replied.

And so, our class ran laps. Some finished early while most were required to do more.

"I'm finally done~!"

Mori-san jogged in my direction while waving her arms.

Some athletic students like Hirata-kun and Sudou-kun kept running to keep their friends company.

"Sensei, was my performance good enough?" Kikuchi-kun asked.

"Oh, Kikuchi. You ran hard, huh? Nice form, nice speed. Good, good!"

"Then... can I go back to the classroom early? I kind of pushed myself today, so I was wondering if I could go ahead and rest before the next subject."

"Hahaha, sure, sure! Great job today as well, Kikuchi! I see you've improved both your academics *and* athletics. As a teacher, I don't mind giving you some preferential treatment for your efforts!"

Preferential treatment? So openly? Is that even allowed...?

"Haha... Thanks, Sensei." Kikuchi-kun scratched his head with an innocent smile as he walked out of the gymnasium.

It was obvious that Kikuchi-kun had other plans-- at least to me, it was.

He waved at Onizuka-kun and his other friends who were still running like their lives depended on it.

"Do you think everything is going to be alright?" Mori-san asked keeping her eyes on Kikuchi-kun's figure.

"What do you mean?"

Her question was sudden, but somehow, I wasn't surprised.

"Eita told me... that it was probably Ayanokouji-kun who saved me."

"I see... Kikuchi-kun figured it out too, huh?"

"You knew about it too, Horikita-san?"

"It's not that I knew but... Well, I didn't think such a convenient coincidence would happen all of a sudden."

Ayanokouji-kun didn't seem interested in the exam, but I'm sure he kept things in check behind the scenes. There's no way he didn't see the enemy's attempts to sully his reputation coming from a mile away, so it wouldn't be farfetched if he anticipated the expulsions either.

"Yeah, I thought I was just lucky."

Ayanokouji-kun wouldn't save Mori-san without a proper reason. Only if we can properly hold on to those 300 class points for at least 18 months would spending 20 million private points be justified. And knowing Ayanokouji-kun, I don't think he's worried about points, anyway.

So the reason why Mori-san was saved...

No... If my hunch is right, then you *were* just lucky, Mori-san.

Before I could continue that train of thought, I decided to ask a different but relevant question.

"Is Kikuchi-kun going to confront him?"

"I think so. Eita plans on joining you guys."

"Join us?"

"Yes, not as fellow leaders, but as someone who's involved with things that an average student wouldn't normally be involved in," she solemnly said.

"Ah, that's what you mean."

In other words, it's like the role that Ryuuken-kun has for someone like Ibuki-san.

"During the sports festival, Eita and I got a glimpse of that world. The way Sakayanagi-san explained the details of her plan to dismantle our class gave me chills. It was a grim reminder that this wasn't a normal high school. And naturally, the best students wouldn't be normal either."

That's right. I've always been confident in my abilities, but I can't see myself leading the class to absolute victory right now.

"Yes... We might need some extra hands that can be trusted," I said.

"Is it really alright for Eita to suddenly impose himself on you, though?"

"I'll be honest. I don't think I have the qualifications to allow

Kikuchi-kun's decision or not. That's probably why he approached Ayanokouji-kun-- not Hirata-kun, not me."

"I see... But do you think Eita will be alright?"

"I'm sure he will. If Kikuchi-kun decides to give us some assistance in that aspect, it'll be a huge help."

Mori-san sighed in relief after hearing my response.

"That's true. It's Eita, after all," she agreed, her cheeks dyed with a slight tinge of pink.

Kikuchi-kun's academics might've been below average, but that doesn't reflect his true intellect. If he had been privy to all the information we had during the Zodiac Exam, I think we might've had a chance to figure out the pattern even sooner. He also knew that cooperating with Sakayanagi-san would minimize our loss during the sports festival.

Not only that. Kikuchi-kun... is probably the wisest person in our class. In terms of people skills, he might be on par with someone like Hirata-kun or Kushida-san despite his lack of presence outside the class. And more importantly, he has a completely different perspective from the two of them. If I can get his full cooperation, we might be able to pick things up a bit.

"I'm very relieved by Kikuchi-kun's decision. He'll be a valuable asset to the class when it counts," I nodded.

"Great!"

"What about you, Mori-san?" I asked.

The question seemed natural, but I don't think the answer will be as simple.

"I would love to," she answered. "But... I'm not entirely sure if I'll be useful. I'm trying my best to improve my studies and physical fitness so I don't hold the class back during written exams and special exams, but that's about it. I'm not as sharp and decisive as you, Horikita-san, nor am I as smart as Eita."

"You're selling yourself short."

Her grades had been steadily improving, and while she wasn't a model student, she was far from being a troublemaker.

"Haha, maybe," she laughed softly. "But I sincerely think that contributing as a regular member of the class might be better for me. If I get involved in the background, I might become a target again. I *am* afraid of getting targeted, but more than that, I'm afraid of causing trouble for you guys."

"Mori-san..."

"Ahh, but I don't think it's hopeless, though."

I tilted my head in wonder and waited for her to continue.

"Hey, Horikita-san. This is just between us, okay?" She leaned in close and started whispering to me. "I'm usually the moodmaker in

the group, right? But when I accidentally overdo it, I earn everyone's ire. That's why Kei and the others are making fun of me behind my back."

"Making fun of you...? Seriously...?"

"Yep. Well, it's actually Kei's *other* group. When the year started, the girls I was closest with were Chiaki and Kei, so I don't necessarily consider the girls in that group as close friends. I mean it was Kei herself who told me."

"So Karuizawa-san has two friend groups?"

"It's a bit complicated, but she has a lot more than that. The same goes for most girls."

"I... I see..."

"Now, now, you don't have to worry about that," Mori-san frantically waved her hands, getting us back on topic. "The point I'm trying to make is that this class is far from perfect. We may or may not have it worse, but I'm sure the other classes are similar to some degree. We have trivial stuff like friend groups and relationships to worry about as high schoolers."

"I'm sorry, I'm not that familiar with the interpersonal relationships of everyone in the class."

"Exactly," she grinned, raising a finger. "I can probably help you with that, Horikita-san. I don't think I can fight other classes on the same battlefield as you or Ayanokouji-kun, but I might be useful somewhere else. If you know the current state of everyone's relationships, then you might make more effective decisions regarding the entire class."

Back then, I didn't know that Sudou-kun had a sour relationship with his clubmates. I didn't know Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun well enough to predict that they were being emotionally manipulated. I decided to ignore Mori-san's strange behavior during the sports festival, and I took Kikuchi-kun's smiles for granted. And finally, I didn't notice Miyamoto-kun's betrayal until it was too late.

If I paid attention to the people around me, and if I thought about them more, I wonder if I could've prevented bad things from happening...?

"I would appreciate your help, Mori-san."

"Of course! We're friends, after all."

Karuizawa-san and Kushida-san are currently cooperating with me and Hirata-kun, but my connection to them isn't as personal as my connection to Mori-san. I'll use that connection to get more detailed information about the class.

"Alright, alright! Faster, faster! You still have to change back to your uniforms, so you better get it together or you'll run out of time!" Higashiyama-sensei loudly reminded.

Mori-san stood up and stretched her arms.

"Ah, by the way, Horikita-san, I'm not that innocent either when it comes to those things."

"And by those things, you mean..."

"Fufun~, I'm also part of a group that makes fun of someone." She mischievously winked at me.

Ohh, well, maybe that's normal for any friend group, I guess...?

"Uh... Don't overdo it, okay?"

"Of course! And also, just call me Nene."

For some reason, her words didn't feel strange to me. It was the same gentleness that I've felt from Nishimura-san, Azuma-san, and Ichihashi-san.

They... were genuinely trying to get to know *me*.

"I see... Then, if it's alright with you, please feel free to call me by my first name as well."

Mori-san-- no, Nene's smile widened. She looked sincerely pleased.

"Alright! Let's talk later, Suzune!"

Character Notes:

Name of Student: Mori Nene

Class Representative: Horikita Suzune

Gender: Female

Birthday: May 9th

Height: 160 cm (5'2")

Hair Color: Brown/Violet

Eye Color: Peanut Brown

Year 1 Evaluation:

Academic Ability: B-

Intelligence: C

Decision-Making: C

Physical Ability: B-

Cooperativeness: B

Personality: Mori has a balanced personality between introversion and extroversion. She is pleased by the company of others but she tends to stay quiet most of the time. Because Mori likes to keep others entertained when the atmosphere gets awkward, she sometimes comes off as someone who is trying too hard when she speaks, making her a bit disliked by other girls. This is especially true whenever Karuizawa, one of her close friends, is involved. Despite that, Mori is generally well-liked

by most of her classmates and she is quite familiar with the inner workings between cliques, albeit not as much as Karuizawa or Kushida.

Hobbies: Mori likes watching anything romantic whether they're dramatic or comedic. She also likes cooking and baking-- Kikuchi being her usual taste-tester. Her favorite drink is orange juice but orange isn't her favorite color. She played the guitar a little bit during middle school and became friends with the guitarists of the class, Okitani and Onizuka.

Abilities: Mori's academic abilities are a little bit above average, the same as her athletic abilities. Her social skills are a little bit on the lower side of things since she's only comfortable with certain people, but what makes up for it is her acute observational skills.

Gallery:

(Mori Nene in middle school.)

Illust by: 135-た

Vol. 7: Chapter 4.3 - Timely Assessment

When our morning class ended, Horikita suddenly tapped me on the shoulder.

"Can I ask you for a favor, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"Hm? Sure, as long as it's not much of a bother. We're about to have lunch."

Horikita looked over my shoulder and saw Haruka and the others waving.

"Suzunon, you can join us!" she called.

"You can eat with us if you don't have plans with others... You're usually just eating in the classroom anyway."

The words came out smoothly which made me feel a bit proud of myself. Practice really makes perfect.

Horikita gave me a dubious look.

"What...?" I asked.

"Oh, sorry... It feels weird when you say something like that with such a tone."

"Hey, I'm working on it."

"I know, I know... It would've been even stranger if your tone was vibrant and lively." She opened her bag and gave me a book. "You wanted to borrow this, right? I finished it last night, and it's due today. It's in high demand, so you can go to the checkout yourself if you want it."

It was Raymond Chandler's book. Going to the checkout myself guarantees my turn to borrow it.

"Does it really have to be-" I checked the logs behind the book and saw the date and time. "Oh... The deadline is an hour from now."

"Well... yes. I'm sorry for the inconvenience," she bowed apologetically.

"No, it's fine." I leaned in beside Horikita's ear and whispered. "In exchange, I want you to do me a little favor. It's a serious one."

I prefaced that this wasn't some sort of joke.

"What do I need to do?" Horikita immediately got the memo and asked.

"I'll tell you the details in the future. But just to let you know what it's about; you'll lend a hand in saving Kikyuu."

"Kushida-san...? I see..." Her confusion was evident, but she didn't

refuse.

I nodded before turning around to face my friends.

"Airi, I'm going to the library for a bit. Do you want to come with me?"

"Eh? Right now?" she asked.

Airi and the others were confused, but they understood why after I did some explaining. She started getting interested in classical mystery books after reading a certain light novel series. She asked me if I could recommend her first book since I was also the one who recommended that series to her, and I figured that this would be a great time.

"Mmm... I kinda want to borrow a book now," said Haruka.

"Oh, please. You wouldn't understand a single thing even if you tried." Akito teased her with a smirk.

"Haha, that's right, Haru-*baka*!" Of course, Ken didn't miss a beat and followed through.

Haruka gripped Ken's arm with force.

"What was that, Kencchin? I don't wanna hear it from someone whose head is more empty than mine!"

Keisei shook his head with a sigh before speaking.

"I don't think trying is a bad thing, but you shouldn't force yourself, Haruka."

"Hmph, fine! I'm in the middle of finishing the latest volume another light novel, anyway!"

Haruka was now an avid light novel reader while Ken moved on to become a gamer who often played with Ijuuin and Professor. Right now, they were busy grinding out a fighting game. Of course, Keisei and I still made sure that Ken's priority was studying and basketball.

Speaking of which, Keisei and Akito didn't change much. Keisei and I got a lot closer as we spent more time together predicting how the future lessons would go in the next semester. And Akito's main hobby is still archery, but he's reading manga a lot more than he did before.

The members of the Ayanokouji Group, with the exception of Keisei, were becoming more and more "cultured", as Professor and Ijuuin would often describe it.

"You guys can start eating. Is that alright with you, Airi?"

"Mhm, sure!" she responded with a resounding yes.

Some guys turned their heads after seeing Airi's bubbly attitude. Noticing this, Ken and the others can't help but smile.

When Airi and I made it to the library, we passed by the service desk and tread through the towering shelves of books. After arriving

at a certain area, a lone girl sitting on one of the tables stood up and approached us.

"Good day, Ayanokouji-kun. It's been a while. And Sakura-san, good day to you as well," Shiina greeted us with a smile.

"Oh, Shiina, hello."

I quickly glanced at Airi. As expected, she was flustered by Shiina's sudden appearance.

"Um... Good afternoon, uh, Shiina-san?"

However, instead of panicking, she returned the greeting and even picked up her name after listening to me.

"I'm sorry for surprising you, Sakura-san. My name is Shiina Hiyori, from Class D. It's nice to meet you. I know your name because Ayanokouji-kun likes to talk about his friends."

I've only ever mentioned my friends' names one time after she asked me about them, though.

"R-Really? I see..." Airi gazed at Shiina's eyes before blinking in wonder. "Um, I'm Sakura Airi. You may already know my name, but I thought I'd introduce myself properly. Nice to meet you, Shiina-san."

"It's a pleasure. So, what brings you here today?" she asked. "I'm just another student like you, but as someone who spends a lot of time in the library, I'm sure I can be of help."

If I didn't get into anime and light novels, I would probably spend a lot of my time in the library as well. That said, given my plan to take a break from my current otaku hobbies, I might show up in this place more frequently.

"A friend asked me to take this book at the check-out since I planned on borrowing it after her," I replied, showing her the book.

"*Farewell, My Lovely*? Wow, how lucky. It's a wonderful book so I've been wanting to reread it. Unfortunately, I didn't find a copy today. It seems as though Raymond Chandler is quite popular with the 2nd-year students."

"That kind of makes me feel bad about borrowing it this way."

"Not at all. I think it's good to take advantage of the situation you're put into. And besides, I've already finished that book in particular."

Airi looked like she wanted to join the conversation, but couldn't find the right amount of courage to interject. As her friend, I should naturally try and help her out.

"Speaking of which, Airi was interested in the genre of mystery. I wanted to recommend a certain book to her, but it might be good to have an expert's opinion like yours. Right, Airi?"

"Eh? A-Ah, for sure... It sounds like Shiina-san is someone who has a lot of knowledge when it comes to classical books."

"I'm not that knowledgeable, Sakura-san, and I'm definitely not an expert," Shiina giggled in response.

"You're being humble. You're not only an honor student-- you've also probably read more stories than me."

"More than Kiyotaka-kun? That's incredible!" Airi's eyes lit up.

"Sakura-san didn't seem like the kind of person who would make such a reaction. It makes me wonder just how much Ayanokouji-kun reads."

It should've been a bizarre comment given how the two of them just met, but knowing how Shiina had observed us, her accurate impression of Airi made a lot of sense. That said, I'm the only one who knew about it, so Airi might've thought her remark was strange.

"S-Sorry for suddenly raising my voice," Airi apologized. "It's just that Kiyotaka-kun does nothing but read when we're not in school."

"Wow! You read *that* much, Ayanokouji-kun?" Shiina turned to me, looking genuinely baffled.

"Well, I got into light novels and manga after enrolling here."

"That's even more of a surprise for me. I didn't think Sakura-san was talking about light literature. The last time we talked about books, Ayanokouji-kun didn't bring up his passion for light novels and manga."

I shrugged, prompting Airi to respond in my place.

"Kiyotaka-kun told us that he read a lot of classical books and novels before he became an otaku."

I have, indeed, become an otaku.

"That's amazing. You've certainly expanded your horizons."

"It makes you think how he can get high grades when we haven't seen him study even once," Airi smiled bitterly.

"Airi, that's a lie."

"N-No, I'm not counting the times when you study with us as a tutor. I'm talking about you studying for yourself."

"Oh my. You don't study on your own for tests, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I do."

Now *that's* a bold-faced lie-- not that my face looked bold in any way.

"Hmmm..." Airi narrowed her eyes and stared at me in suspicion.

"If Sakura-san is telling the truth, then you really are an extraordinary person." Shiina didn't mind stopping the conversation short, finishing it up with a compliment to me.

"Shiina-san is also an honor student, right? I also think you're extraordinary."

Airi seemed to have warmed up to her. Given Shiina's extremely gentle demeanor, I can understand why.

"I appreciate those words. But to tell you the truth, I'm just a person who likes to read stories for the sake of self-satisfaction, so I don't think you should hold me in such high regard... But I do my best to study for tests, though."

The two of them chuckled at my expense.

After a few more short questions, Shiina gracefully gave her approval of the book I recommended. Airi and I finished our business at the service desk and headed back to the classroom.

"Thank you so much, Shiina-san," Airi bowed.

"No problem. I hope we run into each other again sometime," Shiina waved her hand. "Let's talk more again soon, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Thanks for the help, Shiina. I'll contact you when I finish this book."

The two of us walked out of the library and sauntered through the hallways.

"So? How was she?"

"Eh?" Airi was confused by my sudden question.

"Her eyes. Did it tell you anything? You were looking at it earlier, weren't you?"

"O-Oh, you saw that?" she panicked. "I'm sorry, that must've been rude to Shiina-san."

"I don't think so. Isn't it natural to gauge another person's intentions when you meet them? You have every right to use your unique intuition on anybody."

"I see..." Airi looked down with a relieved smile. "Shiina-san... is a kind person."

"Is that so?"

"Yes," she nodded, clutching the book in her arms.

With that judgment, Shiina would be perfect as the first person outside of the class that Airi could interact with. Her genuinely kind nature should help Airi open up to more people.

Author's Notes:

Yeah, as some of you might guess, Kiyotaka's true purpose for bringing Airi to the library was to use her eyes on Hiyori.

The person who can guess the Light Novel series that Kiyotaka recommended to Airi shall be rewarded. What that reward will be? Only the winner will know. (I'll only count one answer per person.)

Vol. 7: Chapter 5.1 - You've Done Well

It always seemed strange to me. I spent three years in middle school without involving myself with others because I wanted to stand on my own two feet. I wanted to be strong, like my older brother. He was stoic, excellent, and perfect in everything he did. He was special, and his talents, combined with hard work, didn't go unnoticed. I strived to be like him, and I wanted him to see me.

"Am I not good enough to be like him?" I thought to myself.

I enrolled in the same high school as Nii-san with the hopes of accomplishing my dream... And that's when I met *him*.

"Sorry. I thought I saw your face before. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were riding on the same bus as me earlier, right?"

That was the first time he talked to me. I thought he was just another law-abiding student with good manners after he helped that old lady, but I was wrong. *He was worse.*

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-- he's an enigmatic person who'd shaped the current me. When Ayanokouji-kun led the class, he kept me close, treating me like an apprentice of sorts. After witnessing the extent of his abilities, the only thing I could do was try my best to keep up with him.

I'd grown to respect him like my brother, and honestly, I wouldn't want to compare the two of them with each other.

When the second semester started, Ayanokouji-kun entrusted his position to me and Hirata-kun. I genuinely thought that the class would grow weaker if anyone other than him took the lead. And just a little over three months later, that thought would be proven true. On the 1st of January, our class will be demoted back to Class C.

I obviously felt disheartened. I may have done my best, but even if I thought I'd taken everything into account, our enemies would find a way to destroy us.

If it were him... If it were Ayanokouji-kun--

"Horikita Suzune-san?" A slightly familiar voice suddenly called to me.

Before I knew it, I arrived in front of Class 3-A's door. I turned to the side and saw Tachibana Akane-senpai with two other students. They were all holding some drinks and snacks.

"Oh, you're Horikita's sibling, right?" said the male student of the

group.

I know him. He was the one who represented Class 3-A during the sports festival; Fujimaki Rentarou-senpai.

"You're so pretty~! But I guess that's to be expected as Manabu's little sis!" The other girl said.

I didn't know her name, but I'd seen her face before. Her looks were attractive, mostly because of her charming smile, and her short brown hair stood out because of its curly ends.

"Good afternoon. Is Nii-san still around by any chance?" I asked.

"Manabu's inside. Feel free to go in!" the girl replied.

"Thank you very much, Senpai." I slightly bowed in gratitude.

"Oh, right~! I'm Saitou Midori. You can call me Midori-senpai if you want!"

"No, that's just what *you* want, Saitou..." Fujimaki-senpai cut in without hesitation.

"Y-You can call me Akane-senpai as well if you want, Suzune-chan!" Tachibana-senpai followed.

"Um, sure..." I didn't really want to get caught up in the conversation, so I just agreed and opened the door.

"You're back." Nii-san's voice echoed inside the empty classroom.

It seems like the four of them were doing some paperwork as a group.

"Manabu, your cute sister paid you a visit!" Midori-senpai yelled.

He took a quick glance and noticed that I was among the people who'd arrived.

"Suzune? What brings you here?" he asked.

"Nii-san... Is it alright if we talk for a bit?"

I can't have cold feet now. I've already managed to make my way here.

"I'll be back," he said to them.

I bowed towards Tachibana-senpai and the others before heading out of the room.

Nii-san faced me with his arms crossed.

"We just lost 400 class points. I'm sorry, Nii-san... I couldn't win like Ayanokouji-kun."

"I'm sure you'd already expected this outcome, Suzune. And I'm not at all relevant to your battles. There was no need to tell me."

"Yes, I know. I'm just doing this for myself," I replied, asserting my selfishness.

I just wanted him to hear me out. It's nothing but an act of self-satisfaction.

"I see," Nii-san paused for a brief second, probably not expecting my answer. "Then that's good. However, beating yourself up over something inevitable is pointless. And besides, it's not entirely your

fault."

"Eh...?"

"That much is obvious. You're working with a class that's mostly composed of subpar students. Suppose your classmates are duplicates of Sakayanagi Arisu or Ichinose Honami's classmates. If you still failed as horribly as you did now, then the problem would've been undoubtedly you."

"But still..."

Nii-san waited for my words, but they wouldn't come out.

"I know you don't want to make excuses. It was your fault that you were initially put in Class D, so leading your current classmates obviously came with it. However, you cannot deny the facts. You will never know if you're on equal grounds with your rivals unless the ones who follow you are also on equal grounds with their opposition."

"Yes... I suppose..."

"You're on the right track. I've said it before, haven't I? I've acknowledged your efforts."

I know that Nii-san wasn't saying all of this to comfort me or make me feel better... He was just stating the truth. Nevertheless, I still felt happy and recognized.

"But Nii-san, effort without result is meaningless..." That said, I stopped myself from being too caught up with his words.

"That's true," he nodded in agreement. "But didn't your effort yield results?"

Results, huh...?

I see. Nii-san isn't talking about our losses.

I managed to lead the class on two events so far: the sports festival and the Paper Shuffle. On both occasions, I didn't push myself to find loopholes or make unconventional strategies like Ayanokouji-kun or our opponents. The strategies I implemented were extremely straightforward. They only had two goals in mind: to maximize the current abilities of my classmates... and to improve them.

"I didn't need to be the student council president to know what you had in mind. I've seen how your class performed at the sports festival, and I've seen the public results of your last special exam. Obviously, you weren't trying to lose, but you've accepted that your chances of winning were extremely low."

In truth, I *was* ready to lose. I placed my faith in the future, so I sacrificed the present.

Of course, Nii-san realized all of this.

"Yes... but that gamble... came at a price."

"Miyamoto Soshi, huh?"

Class points can be taken back... but an expelled classmate is lost forever.

"I believe that my approach towards the sports festival and the Paper Shuffle Exam was the best course of action in the long run. Ayanokouji-kun even stood behind me." I gazed down while clenching my fists. "But I failed to be on the same page as my classmates. I thought I was being transparent, but it wasn't enough. If I shared my vision with everyone, then maybe... I could've prevented Miyamoto-kun from getting expelled."

The reason why I kept my so-called "vision" to myself was to avoid putting pressure on everyone. I wanted them to improve without imposing the idea that I demanded their improvement. Since their improvement would be painfully gradual, we were bound to lose a lot of fights. That's where it all went wrong. Because of our losses, Miyamoto-kun thought that our class would continue losing in the future as well. This led to his fear that our class might not graduate as Class A. And it wasn't just him either. A lot of our classmates shared the same thoughts.

I must have made a mistake.

"There's a limit to what you can share. A lot of the time, it's better to keep some details to yourself. Miyamoto brought his expulsion upon himself. He was shortsighted, and that's his fault. Anyone who shares that view is the same."

"You knew about it?"

"Even as a regular student, I still have my connections inside the student council. I coincidentally managed to hear a handful of details from someone I know."

"I see... I guess that's to be expected of you, Nii-san." I smiled weakly. "If it was Ayanokouji-kun, I'm sure Miyamoto-kun wouldn't have been expelled..."

Nii-san sighed while shaking his head.

"You shouldn't compare yourself to Ayanokouji. He is an anomaly. Even I don't know the real extent of what he's capable of. Since he stopped using his abilities to lead your class, then this outcome was the only possibility-- at least for now."

"Well... Yes, you're right."

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Suzune, you stopped being needlessly arrogant, but on the other hand, you're taking too much accountability to yourself that it's starting to weaken your authority as a leader."

"Authority...?"

"You must let them know that *they* are the ones lacking, not *you*. Or am I wrong?"

"No," I shook my head firmly. "While I'm aware of my

shortcomings, the burdens of the class are those who stayed weak. *They* are holding back the ones who are trying their best to become stronger."

"And what is it that you must do?"

"I have to let them know exactly just that."

Nii-san nodded-- a smile peeking from his face.

"You've done well, Suzune. But you're only getting started."

"Yes... Thank you, Nii-san."

He turned around and opened the door without saying another word. It seems like goodbyes were unnecessary for him.

"Ah! You're done? Bye-bye, Suzune-chan!" Midori-senpai and the other two waved their hands to me.

That day, I couldn't help but smile to myself, feeling slightly fulfilled.

I see... So Nii-san was properly looking at me.

Author's Notes:

Saitou Midori's appearance was taken from Oregairu's Orimoto Kaori.

Vol. 7: Chapter 5.2 - A Leader's Stance

"Alright, class dismissed."

Everyone was prepared to leave. As Chabashira Sae fixed a stack of papers, she promptly walked towards the door.

"Ayanokouji, can you come with me to the faculty room? I want you to distribute a few reading materials to the class at a later date."

Being one of the honor students, no one batted an eye at her sudden call. These types of errands were usually taken care of by students like him, Hirata, Horikita, or Kushida. Ayanokouji followed her out without saying a word.

When the two of them left, Horikita Suzune finally found her opportunity.

"Everyone, I would like to have a word with all of you one last time before winter break."

Horikita did normal meetings regarding points in the past. She also did numerous strategy meetings preceding the sports festival and the Paper Shuffle Exam. And of course, a much-needed number of meetings were needed to address the issue with Miyomoto.

This time, the students of Class 1-A didn't feel too surprised either. But they did wonder what Horikita wanted to talk about.

"Please remain seated, everyone," said Class A's other leader, Hirata Yousuke.

On paper, Horikita was the ideal leader, much like Hirata. She was competent, serious, and honest, and she never wasted their time. Even if she wasn't as socially active as her co-leader, Horikita didn't ignore her classmates like she initially did.

If Horikita wanted to discuss something involving the whole class, it was bound to be important. All 37 students (not counting Ayanokouji and Kouenji who both immediately left for vastly different reasons) stopped what they were doing and sat back down.

"I'll be frank. Even if Miyamoto-kun was a traitor, the things that he said weren't false or baseless. It is a fact that we started losing after I took Ayanokouji-kun's position, so if the majority of the class wants me to step down, then I don't mind doing so."

Her sudden words made everyone gasp.

"Suzune...!"

"Suzunon..."

Some students look worried as well, especially Hasebe and Mori who just became closer to Horikita recently.

"Horikita-san, I don't think you have to do that... I'm also a leader, but I was just as powerless during the sports festival and Miyamoto-kun's situation..." said Hirata.

"I think it's a reasonable proposal, though. Hirata-kun was also treated as a co-leader even during Ayanokouji-kun's leadership. I, on the other hand, became a leader just because Ayanokouji-kun said so. If the class doesn't have the same opinion, then we have a debate on our hands," Horikita replied without a hint of stress or emotion. She was just stating some cold hard logic.

"Before you continue with this, I want to set things straight, Horikita-san," Karuizawa spoke up. "You're not saying all this just because you're drowning in misery after our repeated losses, are you?"

The thought on the back of everyone's mind has finally been addressed. Horikita's classmates could only stare at Karuizawa in awe for putting it out there without hesitation.

"I'm glad you tried to clarify that, Karuizawa-san," Horikita nodded before facing everyone once again. "After coming to this school, I've seen many students who are more capable than me in many different aspects. Some are more athletic than I am, like Kinoshita-san from Class D. A few others can surpass me in academics like Yukimura-kun or Sakayanagi-san. And finally, I'm especially weak when it comes to socializing, unlike Kushida-san or Hirata-kun, or someone like Ichinose-san. They are some of the most influential students due to their self-made connections, and I can only dream of having superb social skills like theirs."

The class continued staring at Horikita in silence as they listened to her words. As students who were branded as defects, they were forced to look at themselves and evaluate their use for the class. Some used this realization to reflect and improve, while some chose to stay stagnant.

"With all that said, I still believe that my abilities are top-notch, even among the best students in our year. I'm sure I've proven that time and time again during class and exams. I'm discussing this topic not because I've lost my confidence as a student or as a leader. I'm here to *re-establish* my position. I believe that I'm worthy to be a class leader, and if anyone here thinks that they or someone else should lead the class with Hirata-kun instead of me, then feel free to raise your suggestion."

She looked over every single one of us with a sharp, piercing gaze.

Their current leaders were Horikita and Hirata, and they were

losing. They were winning in the past, so the fact that they're losing now is the leaders' fault, right? That's why Horikita laid out this sudden proposal.

They couldn't suggest someone like Kushida because while everyone liked her kind personality and recognized her competence as a student, they believed that she wasn't fit to be a leader who could make decisive choices. The same could be said with Karuizawa or Kikuchi. Even if they have the makings of a good leader, they lack excellence in areas that would brand them as viable options for the position.

They didn't even need to think for more than a minute before deciding who their leader should be.

"Wouldn't Ayanokouji be the obvious choice? Soshi already said it. Unless Ayanokouji is our leader, we're bound to lose..." said Yamauchi.

Almost all of them probably thought of his name, but none of them were able to say it out loud. Everyone tensed up as they waited for Horikita's reply.

"That's correct, Yamauchi-kun. But do you think that's possible? The reason why I'm the one standing here right now is because Ayanokouji-kun *can't* be the leader."

"Then why can't he?"

Yamauchi secretly cursed himself in his mind for spouting such a question on reflex. He already knew the answer, but he couldn't accept it. Most of them couldn't.

"You already know this. Everyone in the class already knows this. Ayanokouji-kun has had enough of being the leader. The burden has become too much for him."

Of course, Horikita knew that it was a lie. But as far as everyone who didn't know was concerned, that was the truth.

"If I were to play devil's advocate..." Maezono-san raised her voice. "What if Ayanokouji-kun was just pretending? What if he just didn't want the responsibility anymore... even if he can still lead us?"

Horikita sighed, expecting her words.

"Let's say that's the case. What are we going to do about it?" she responded with a question.

"Maybe we can confront him... and ask him?"

"But if we do that, Ayanokouji-kun can always continue denying it. It's not like we have any evidence that he was lying about his reason for stepping down... And even if Ayanokouji-kun comes clean-- even if he admits that he just didn't feel like leading us anymore, what are we going to do about it? Shun him? Ostracize him?"

"T-That..."

"We've been through this conversation before when Kikuchi-kun argued with Miyamoto-kun and Ike-kun. We have no right to push Ayanokouji-kun into anything when he's still contributing more than most of us with his current performance. Isn't it pathetic to rely on his leadership just because we're losing?"

Most of their classmates averted their eyes.

"Ayanokouji-kun, even as a regular member of the class, is not detrimental. In fact, he's the opposite. That's why I also believe we're not in the place to tell him what he should do regardless of his motivations. If we want to win, then it's up to us to be better." Hirata spoke in a serious tone.

If you want to order Ayanokouji around, at least make sure that you're better than him. That was the essence of Hirata's words.

"I want to make it very clear that Hirata-kun and I will certainly take responsibility for our losses. We *are* the leaders, after all." Horikita pressed her hands on the podium and leaned forward. "However, that responsibility doesn't fall on us alone. I want all of you to improve until you can compete with-- no, until you can *defeat* the students of our rival classes."

It's not that *their* leaders were incompetent. It was *the rest of the class* that was incompetent. They were the ones at fault for the class's losses. They were the ones at fault for being subpar. That's what Horikita wanted them to know.

"We lost the sports festival because Sakayanagi-san outsmarted my strategy, but we wouldn't have been in *that* much trouble if all of us were decently athletic. We lost the Paper Shuffle Exam because we were matched up with Class B and Class C, but we wouldn't have needed to worry if all of us could score well on written tests. I'm not trying to shift the blame on everyone because we lost. I'm trying to make all of you acknowledge that we are *all* at fault here. That's all I wanted to say." Horikita promptly headed back to her seat and grabbed her bag. "Well then, please have a good rest of your day."

Ike, Yamauchi, and Hondou gazed downwards with guilty faces. Not only them. Some of the girls were also making the same expressions. Seeing this, Karuizawa shrugged with a sigh.

"A lot of you were getting pretty comfortable with the fact that Horikita-san and Yousuke-kun are taking the blame for everything. So it's good that we're all reminded that it's not *their* fault if *we* are performing badly," she said.

"Everyone, please take Horikita-san's words seriously. We, as leaders, want to win. We all want this class to graduate as Class A. And the only way to do that is for us to overcome our weaknesses,"

They all knew that Horikita was right. Their complacency was caused by two factors. One was their overreliance on their leaders and the few capable students who could compete with the best students of the higher class on equal grounds. And the other was their class's undefeated record when Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was their leader.

However, they needed to face reality. Now that the competition was starting to escalate, they needed to step up for themselves or they might end up like Miyamoto who wasn't around as their classmate anymore.

A few minutes earlier...

"Sensei, this isn't the way to the teachers' faculty," Ayanokouji nonchalantly asked.

"I know," she replied.

Chabashira Sae's taut demeanor made him start guessing.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

Vol. 7: Chapter 5.3 - That Man

"I'm sure you have your guesses, Ayanokouji. Even I'm not too thrilled about this development."

I was Chabashira-sensei's lifeline. Unless Horikita and the rest of the class develop to the point of independence, graduating as Class A will continue to be a pipe dream.

"It's the man with the same surname as I do, right?"

"So you don't acknowledge him as your father?"

I wonder if I should take that response as confirmation.

"In what sense? Technically speaking, he is my biological father. I do acknowledge that," I replied.

Around that time, I noticed that we walked further and further away from the classroom area.

"Then how about in the emotional sense?"

This time, Sensei's question was met with silence, making her sigh.

"Don't worry, I won't pry if you don't want me to."

"How considerate of you."

"We all have our circumstances. I'll involve myself with you strictly as your class adviser, so feel free to make your moves with me in mind."

That's how it's always been though. We've established a symbiotic relationship and have been making use of each other since long ago. It seems like Chabashira-sensei wants to continue that relationship if things go well after this.

I figured out her obsession with Class A early on but... I wonder what's *behind* that obsession.

Regardless, Chabashira-sensei didn't need to be so worried. I'm not going anywhere.

"That's pretty helpful," I shrugged. "Will Chairman Sakayanagi be there?"

"He'll arrive a bit later. The visit was too sudden, so even the chairman was caught off-guard."

We tread through the hallways of offices, and after a few minutes, the two of us stopped in front of a door.

"Chabashira-sensei..."

Before she could say anything, I told her something that may or may not happen later on.

After a few moments of explaining, Chabashira-sensei finally understood my intentions.

"It's that dangerous...?" she asked with an anxious face.

"Yes," I nodded. "I'll be counting on you."

After nodding back, Chabashira-sensei spoke.

"Principal, I've brought Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun."

"Enter." The reply came from a familiar voice that carried the dignity of age.

A man who was around sixty sat on a sofa. I'd seen him multiple times in different significant school occasions. He was indeed our school principal. That said, his current demeanor betrayed my initial impressions of him. He wasn't calm. In fact, he looked pretty rattled with cold sweat trickling down his forehead.

Of course, the reason was the man sitting opposite to him. It was unexpected, but not surprising.

"You two may talk now," said the principal. "I trust this is acceptable?"

"Of course," replied the man.

It had been one year-- no, a year and a half since the last time I heard this man's voice.

"Very well. I'll take my leave now. Please excuse me." The principal humbly lowered his head towards the man despite being around twenty years older than him.

"I'll excuse myself as well." Chabashira-sensei bowed graciously and left with the principal.

Before she was out of sight, I noticed the slightly worried look in her eyes. As the door closed, the only sound I could hear was the heating system's faint whirring.

As I stood completely still and silent, the man spat his first words directed towards me.

"How about you take a seat? I came all the way here to meet with you, after all."

His tone and way of speaking hadn't changed at all.

"I'm not planning to have a long conversation. I'm busy."

"Busy? What could possibly make *you* busy?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Living a normal high school life, I suppose."

"Oh?" Looking mildly interested, he continued asking. "And what would a normal high school life, by your definition, entail?"

His condescending tone was an obvious mockery of what I just said.

"Hmm... Based on what I've been doing so far, I suppose it's working together with my classmates and friends while still being able to have time for leisure and fun."

"Don't make me laugh. Do you even hear what's coming out of your mouth? Friends? Having fun? Do you seriously think *you're* capable of doing those?"

That's true. Everything I've said thus far is extremely alien to what my whole life has been since birth. Someone like me who didn't have a normal upbringing can't possibly adjust without some sort of difficulty or catch.

"The results speak for themselves. Of course, you wouldn't know that."

"I don't need to know these results that you speak of," he sneered. "There's no doubt in my mind that it's nothing but a fabricated outcome using brute force and manipulation. In other words, a *fake*. You know that more than anyone else, Kiyotaka."

He shook his head indicating his dismissal. This was typical of him. He just assumed that what he believed was true.

Although, he was right. That was the catch.

"And reaching Class A? I never would've thought you'd do something so pointlessly reckless."

He's done his research, which was to be expected. That, or maybe he extracted some information from the principal himself.

"Nothing you say to me will change anything. Just tell me what you want," I said.

He laid down a bunch of papers on the coffee table.

"I see you've started to act like a cheeky brat, but that doesn't matter. I've prepared the documents necessary for you to drop out. I spoke to the principal about it. All I need is for you to say yes."

Without wasting a beat, he cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"I have no reason to drop out," I replied.

"For you, that might be true. But I have my own reasons."

He looked right at me for the first time. The sharp gleam in his eyes hadn't faded. If anything, it'd grown sharper. His gaze was a blade, threatening to slice the very heart of you. I was sure that gaze had wounded many people.

"How shamelessly selfish. But I guess that's something I should expect from you."

"*You* have no right to talk to me about selfishness. You were ordered to remain on standby, but you defied me and enrolled at this school. Making you drop out is just setting things back to how they were."

"Ordered, huh?" I glanced at the chair that I was supposed to sit on. "Your orders were absolute in the White Room. But the moment I stepped out of that place, I was no longer obliged to follow any of them-- not the instructors', not yours."

We might've been arguing with logic in mind, but there's no way

we could convince one another.

"You've become quite talkative in the short time since we last met. I suppose that's due to this absurd school's influence, hm?"

"Can you, of all people, really call this school *"absurd"*?"

"I suppose not," he snorted in amusement.

"Well then... I've given you my answer, so I suppose there's no need for me to be here any longer."

Before I could turn around, he simply sighed with a dour expression on his face.

"I thought we've taught you well, but it seems like we were mistaken. How did you even come to the conclusion that you don't have to follow my orders outside the White Room? You're my property, Kiyotaka. A man can do whatever he pleases with their property. Whether I keep you alive or kill you is up to me," he said coldly.

The fact that he could say such things in a law-abiding country while meaning them says a lot about the kind of environment he operates in.

That said, it doesn't necessarily concern me.

"You sure like saying such outdated and clichéd things. Calling me your property won't make me scurry back to your side like an obedient employee. As long you can't give me a proper reason, I'm not gonna drop out," I replied.

He probably already knew that this back-and-forth was pointless, so he moved on to his next method.

"Don't you wonder how Matsuo's doing? He was the person who told you about this school and gave you the idea to enroll, after all."

"Not especially," I replied, remembering Matsuo's face.

"Really now? I hired him to manage you because I recognized his skills as a butler. And while I thought one measly year was already way too long of a break for you, I didn't expect Matsuo to go against his employer on top of it."

He spoke in one breath without pausing. Every move, every glance, and every way his words come out of his mouth are designed to make me fearful. It was his intimidation tactic to make me wonder just how bad things were about to get.

I quietly waited for him to continue.

"Hm," he suddenly smirked.

Sensing that making the conversation more dramatic was useless, he shook his head with a scoff. This man knew that whatever tone he used or whatever glare he gave me wouldn't be taken seriously.

"I'll skip the pretense and just tell you how things are, Kiyotaka. Naturally, Matsuo had to be punished for essentially making you disobey me."

His tone was normal, but his words were threatening. However, his goal wasn't to threaten me. He was simply stating a fact.

"You can probably already guess what I'm about to say," he leaned back. "Matsuo was disciplined and dismissed."

"If he went against his employer, that's an appropriate punishment," I said.

My butler, Matsuo, was nearly sixty years old. He was an amicable man who was exceptionally good at taking care of people. Any child would've liked him.

Matsuo married young but hadn't been blessed with children right away. He was already over forty when he had his first baby, and unfortunately, he also lost his wife in childbirth. His son was about my age, and he was Matsuo's pride and joy. I'd never met the boy myself, but Matsuo said his son studied diligently every day so that he could achieve great things and repay his father's sacrifices. His smile as he said those words were still etched in my memory.

"You know about him, I assume. Matsuo's son, his pride and joy."

He saw right through me, predicting my train of thought.

"When you enrolled at this school, Matsuo's son also managed to pass the entrance exam for a prestigious private high school. He worked hard and achieved it all on his own."

"So he's the one you targeted, huh? At best, you'd expel him," I interrupted.

"That's exactly what I did," he replied.

"I'm surprised. Honestly, that's a mild punishment for someone like you. It probably doesn't even count as payback." My words were laced with sarcasm.

"I never said that was all I did." He lowered his voice in displeasure. "Matsuo's son was strong. Even though he was expelled from the school on which he'd pinned his hopes, his determination didn't fade. He bounced back and immediately tried to enroll in other schools. I did whatever was necessary to crush his attempts to advance. I made him give up. I did the same to Matsuo, too. I tarnished his reputation, leaving him unable to find a job. His son also lost his way, and is now unemployed."

Long story short, they lost everything. And this man was making me hear all of it because I was the reason it all happened.

Was this story embellished? Was he making it up? If so, then I wouldn't be surprised if he keeps on adding on to it depending on my reactions.

Honestly, he wasn't the type of person to make a prank like that, so his words were still mostly true. However, whether his story was the truth or not didn't matter to me. If he came all this way to spout such nonsense, then he was in for a disappointment.

"I imagine you're not surprised by any of this. Matsuo acted against me, so I needed to repay him in kind. Sadly, the payback was more than he could bear. He felt guilty for having robbed his child of a future, and he felt like the only way to save him was to beg that I leave the boy alone. To show his sincerity, Matsuo committed suicide by self-immolation. It happened just a month ago."

"And what do you hope to get for telling me all of that? Do you think I'd break down on my knees with guilt and drop out?"

The corners of his mouth curved into a despicable grin.

"The man who took care of you had died and you show no reaction whatsoever. His son is a lost cause too. If Matsuo could see now, I wonder if he'd be full of regret."

Is this some kind of sick, unfunny joke?

"Your logic doesn't track. You were the one who did all of it, not me."

"It does. I wouldn't have done anything if he didn't instill such a foolish idea inside your head."

"Even if you say that, there's no evidence that what you say is the truth," I argued.

"Matsuo's death has already been recorded. Do you want me to send you the papers confirming it?" he asked, daring me to ask for them.

Faking official documents was all too easy for this man. I don't want to waste my time on them.

"If he really is dead, then that's all the more reason for me to stay in school. Matsuo helped me enroll even though he knew you'd punish him. I must honor his wishes."

I'll give his ridiculous story a ridiculous reply.

Hearing that, he could only widen his entertained smile.

"What a farce," he said.

I'd always followed his orders before. Well, I followed the *White Room's* orders. It had been my entire world. This man's sole failure was the one year he left me with Matsuo.

"While you're still you, something definitely changed. What happened that year? What made you so determined to go to this school?" he asked.

"It's certainly true that you supplied me with the best possible education. Even though you used methods that must be kept from the public, I can't deny what the White Room offered. I don't plan on revealing my past to anyone, nor will I do anything that would endanger you." That was my last compromise. "However, I'm the result of your absolute pursuit of an ideal. That was your mistake."

I was a first-year high school student. I was only sixteen years

old, but my knowledge far exceeded what a normal person could learn in a lifetime. That was precisely what allowed me to recognize the infinite bounds of human curiosity.

"You taught us all kinds of things. Not just the liberal arts and sciences, but martial arts and self-defense techniques, and bits of worldly wisdom too numerous to mention. Learning fascinated me, but while you taught us many things, you didn't teach us everything," I declaimed.

"Is that what led you to run away?"

"Do you think I could learn what I have at this school if I stayed with you? What's freedom? What's love? What's camaraderie? What does it mean to be unconstrained? I wanted to learn about the common, everyday world that you deemed worthless and turned your back on," I continued. "Do you think I'd ever get those experiences if I stayed in the White Room?"

Even he can't deny that. The White Room might've been the most efficient facility for nurturing and training someone in the entire world, but you couldn't learn everything about the world there. It was a facility that cut away anything it deemed unnecessary-- to the extreme.

"Matsuo told me that this school was the only place in Japan where you couldn't reach me."

If I hadn't chosen this school, I would've probably been forcefully expelled. And if I just waited as instructed, I would've been put back in the White Room again.

"It seems that I have no choice but to accept. I suppose that temporarily suspending the facility's activity was a mistake. To think that a plan sixteen years in the making could be ruined in just a year..."

The White Room's temporary shutdown was a hard blow for this man. But if he was finally contacting me after a little over six months, something must've happened behind the scenes.

"I understand why you're," he continued. "But if you think the matter is settled, you're naive. As with Matsuo's son, I can force you to quit."

"I can't imagine you'll be able to do anything, considering that the government backs this school," I replied.

"That's a statement made without proof."

"Well, I don't see any of the bodyguards who normally follow you everywhere. You shouldn't be without them, since so many people hold grudges against you. But your bodyguards are nowhere to be seen-- not in this room, not in the hallway," I argued.

"There's no need to bring a bodyguard along to visit a high school," he replied, gulping down the last of his lukewarm tea.

"That's sloppy. You even bring guards to escort you to the bathroom. Just say that you couldn't bring them here even if you wanted to because the authorities didn't allow it."

If he didn't comply, he wouldn't have been permitted to take even a single step inside.

"You still lack proof."

"I don't need proof. If you had the power to simply force my expulsion, you would've done so immediately. But you didn't. You came all the way here to try to convince me to drop out. That's strange."

It's not like he personally met and convinced Matsuo's son to drop out. He just brought the hammer down on him from a distance based on his story.

"And one more thing. You could easily consider this school enemy territory. If you took aggressive action here and the public found out, your dreams of making a comeback would disappear forever, wouldn't they?"

"Did Matsuo put that idea in your head? Even in death, he's still impeding me."

"I couldn't possibly deduce all that from things Matsuo said."

Matsuo didn't tell me any details nor did he need to. I could easily guess what was going on.

"Putting aside the facility's temporary suspension, there's another problem you never considered. No matter how perfectly you train someone, sooner or later, a rebellious phase occurs."

A mere fifteen years of education couldn't possibly go against ancient traditions in our DNA. Adolescent rebellion was ingrained in all of us.

"Even then, you shouldn't have veered off your path. From the very beginning, you were taught that there was no point in learning unnecessary things."

His words were filled with holes.

"It's not *my* path. It's the path *you* want me to take. And determining what's unnecessary for me isn't for you to judge," I rebutted. "This *"rebellion"* is where my personality is shown. The White Room may be able to mass-produce high-quality students in the future, but it can't remove their individuality and idiosyncrasies as they grow. I, for one, have an insatiable curiosity and an inquisitive spirit. And on top of that, I want to decide my own path. It's that simple."

"Utter nonsense. The only path in this world is the one I prepared for you. You will one day surpass me and become the person who guides Japan into the future. Why can't you understand that?"

"That's just a story you tell yourself."

"It seems I can't get through to you."

"Looks like we agree on that point."

Our statements only went in circles, not intersecting. We'd never see eye to eye.

"The White Room has resumed operations. This time, my plans are perfect. Nothing will get in the way. I'm prepared to make up for lost time," he sighed.

If one year was already considered as "lost time" that needed to be made up for, then three years was probably non-negotiable.

"In that case, you must have quite a few candidates to succeed you. Why fixate on me?"

"It's true that things are going well. However, no one exhibits the talent level that you do."

"Flattery won't work on me," I said sarcastically.

"Return, Kiyotaka. That's an order."

"I won't. My mind will never change."

"This is the last question I'll ask you, Kiyotaka. Consider everything very carefully before answering me." He leaned forward once again. "Which would you prefer? To drop out of this school of your own free will, or to have me force you to leave?"

He looks determined to drag me back there. I didn't know what measures he expected to take, but I didn't care nor did I want to know.

Regardless, my answer was obvious after that long deadly silence.

"I see," he simply said.

"I don't know if there's any help for a man like you, but I have no intention of yielding. This school is developing its students' talents, albeit differently from you. I expect to learn a lot here," I replied.

"How foolish. This school is nothing more than a barn full of common rabble. I'm sure that your own class holds many such worthless bottom-feeders with no hope of salvation."

"Worthless bottom-feeders? Not at all. This is a place where I may discover whether human beings are made equal or not. I find that quite interesting."

"You think that even incompetent morons can stand toe-to-toe with geniuses?"

"That's what I hope."

"You want to destroy my ideals then."

"We should end this. We know that, no matter how long we talk, we'll never reach a middle ground."

Just then, someone knocked at the door.

"Please excuse me."

A familiar man slowly opened the door. Finally, the chairman was here. His expression was grim at the sight of our unexpected

visitor.

"It's been quite some time, Ayanokouji-sensei," he said, bowing low like a subordinate addressing a superior.

"Sakayanagi. Seeing you gives me a rush of nostalgia. It's been... what-- seven, eight years?" He raised an eyebrow.

"I suppose it's been that long since I succeeded my father as school board chairman. Time flies," the chairman replied before turning to me. "It's been a while, Kiyotaka-kun."

"It's nice to meet you again, Chairman."

"So the two of you have met each other already?" the man asked.

"Well, it was merely due to some circumstances in school. Kiyotaka-kun has been an excellent student."

"We finished speaking, so I'll be heading back." The man stood up.

"Ah, would you mind waiting just for a moment longer? I was hoping to speak to you both, Ayanokouji-sensei. Please, have a seat. You too, Kiyotaka-kun."

I couldn't really refuse the chairman's request. And while the two of us were caught off-guard by the timing, we already expected this man's arrival. I'm sure the chairman would like to pick his brain a little.

"I already heard from the principal. You intend to make him withdraw from the school, hm?" the chairman asked as he sat beside me.

"That's right. Since it's what his parent wishes, the school must immediately take appropriate action."

That's rich coming from someone who never treated me as their child. Well, it's not like I've ever recognized him as my parent either.

"I'm afraid that's incorrect. It's certainly true that parents have a significant say in a student's attendance here, but we must examine the reasons they might wish for their child to drop out. For example, if a student were subject to terrible bullying, we'd certainly take that into account. Are you being bullied, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"Absolutely not. I have a lot of friends, and my social life is very healthy." (1)

"This is a farce. I want him to quit attending a school he enrolled at without his parent's permission."

Farce, huh? He's so familiar with that word, isn't he?

"High school isn't considered compulsory education, and attendance isn't mandatory. Students are free to attend any high school of their choosing. If parents paid tuition, it might be a different story, but the government covers all this school's fees. Our students' autonomy is our top priority," Chairman Sakayanagi

explained.

"If you go to this school, you can escape from the White Room."

I finally understood what Matsuo meant by those words. He said that because of Chairman Sakayanagi's existence. He spoke to my father without a hint of cowardice or fear. Unlike the principal, who groveled before people in positions of authority, the chairman held firm. He wasn't kidding when he reassured me back then.

"You've changed, too. Where did the old agreeable you go?" the man asked.

"I still respect you, Ayanokouji-sensei. However, it's precisely because I share my father's vision for this school that I intend to follow in his footsteps. I'm sure you understand that well. None of these policies have changed since my father's time."

"You're free to succeed your father and carry on his wishes. But if that's your intention, then why did you allow Kiyotaka to enter this school?"

"Why, you ask? Because we determined that he qualified for admission based on his interview and exam results."

"Don't dodge the question. This school is fundamentally unlike ordinary schools. Kiyotaka should never have been a suitable candidate for admission. I know that the interviews and exams are just for show."

Chairman Sakayanagi's pleasant smile didn't change, but his gaze started to feel different.

"Even though you could say you've retired, you remain an impressive figure, Ayanokouji-sensei. You're quite well-informed."

"He was recommended to this school in secret. The moment that happened, his acceptance was decided. To put it in other words, it's strange that any and all students, no matter who they are, would be disqualified if they don't have a recommendation. Am I wrong?"

"Kiyotaka never should've been among the possible candidates in the first place. It's abnormal that you didn't disqualify him."

"You're correct. We normally reject unexpected applications from students not on our list, and we have an interview and exam to camouflage that fact. He's not the only student I've approved for admission based solely on my own judgment. You may be here because you wish to take him back, but he's one of our valued students now. Since he's in our care, I have a responsibility to protect him. Even if this request comes from you, I'm afraid I must refuse-- as long Kiyotaka-kun himself doesn't wish to quit, that is." The chairman looked in my direction with a smile.

"Don't screw with me," the man spat.

"If you still wish us to dismiss him, we'll arrange a three-way discussion with you, Kiyotaka-kun, and a school representative until

we reach an agreement."

The chairman had essentially rejected my expulsion. This man--my father had no cards left to play.

"If that's how things stand, I'll find another way."

"What do you intend to do? If it's anything extreme, then--"

"I understand. I have not the slightest intention of putting any pressure on you. You should have no complaints if Kiyotaka is expelled in accordance with the school rules, correct?"

"Yes, I can assure you that the school won't give him special treatment just because he's your son."

"In that case, we're done talking. If you'll excuse me." The man got up from the sofa and prepared to leave.

"When will we meet again."

"Who knows? But it's certainly not here."

"I'll see you off."

"No need."

Before he could leave, I wanted to give him a parting message.

"If you call yourself a parent, why not come by every now and then?"

"Coming to a place like this once is quite enough." With those cutting words, the man left the office.

After a few moments, Chairman Sakayanagi finally broke the silence.

"Whew," he said. "It sure feels like you're on pins and needles when Ayanokouji-sensei is around, doesn't it? Was it tough for you?"

"Not really," I shrugged.

Now that it was just the two of us, Chairman Sakayanagi looked at me with kind eyes.

"How have you been doing, Ayanokouji-kun?" he asked.

"You should probably keep calling me by my first name. I assume that man's name would pop up in our conversations, so I want to avoid confusion."

"I see. That's very considerate of you," he nodded. "So? Is everything alright?"

"Yes. I'm having a very fulfilling high school life right now."

"I'm glad to hear that. It's late, but I would like to congratulate your promotion to Class A. You really are an amazing student."

"The results don't tell the whole story. Your daughter, Arisu, was absent during the most decisive times of the first semester. That was the reason why our journey to Class A was smooth sailing. After I stepped down, she easily trampled over our class during the second semester."

She even got one of our classmates expelled, but no one knows

how she did it.

"I see. So that was the case," he smiled proudly. "Even then, I thought the Katsuragi Kouhei-kun would at least put up a fight."

"He's an excellent student himself. The reason why I didn't need to worry about him was Ryuuen Kakeru."

"Ryuuen Kakeru-kun, huh...? He's... going to be your opponent, isn't he?"

"Yes. Thank you for hearing out my unreasonable request," I slightly bowed before lowering my voice. "And if possible, I want to keep Kikyou in the dark for now."

The chairman leaned closer for a whisper in return.

"So you already know, that she's here?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"As expected of you," he replied before speaking up. "You may enter now."

The door opened and two figures appeared. One was Chabashira-sensei and the other one was...

"Kiyotaka-kun!"

"Kikyou."

My best friend didn't care about being in the presence of the chairman himself and ran up to me.

Author's Notes:

- 1. This is probably what canon Kiyotaka wished he could say.*

Vol. 7: Chapter 5.4 - Segue

"Kushida, mind your manners." Chabashira-sensei stoically scolded her.

Kikyou blushing stopped in her tracks.

"R-Right, I'm sorry!" She hastily turned to the chairman and bowed her head. "Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. I'm sorry for my behavior."

"It's alright, Kushida-kun. I'm sure you were worried about Kiyotaka-kun over here." He stood up and offered his seat beside me. "If possible, I would like to have a word with you too."

Kikyou was reluctant to accept the seat, but she was left with no choice after Chairman Sakayanagi sat on the other sofa.

Chabashira-sensei looked confused about this development. She never expected the chairman to have Kikyou join the conversation. Of course, if it was the chairman's desire to talk to us, then she couldn't really do anything about it.

"Chabashira-sensei, would be it alright if you could pour some tea for all of us?" he asked.

"Of course, Chairman."

"You can take your seat if you want to accompany your students. It won't take long."

"I understand." Chabashira-sensei quietly sat down on the vacant sofa after serving the tea.

"I coincidentally saw you and Chabashira-sensei in the hallway on my way here. Did you know about Kiyotaka-kun's situation?"

Kikyou had turned her angel mode on. I can see it from her cunningly crafted smile.

"Um, I didn't. But Chabashira-sensei told me that it was about Kiyotaka-kun's father."

It doesn't sound like Kikyou knows about the chairman's name. If it's her, then she might be able to get some information on Sakayanagi without being suspicious.

"You're right. Did you see him leave?"

"Yes, we did. He passed by us not too long ago when he left the room," she answered. "But that's strange. I thought there was a rule that students of this school cannot come into contact with relatives from the outside and vice versa."

I've already told Kikyou a little about that man a long time ago,

but I guess she wants to prod into the chairman's knowledge about him as well.

Chairman Sakayanagi responded with an understanding nod.

"Well, you see, Kiyotaka-kun's father is a very powerful man. That much should explain how he was able to bypass that rule. And on top of that, he was actually asking for Kiyotaka-kun to drop out of school."

Hearing that, Kikyou's composure crumbled in an instant. She tried her best to keep up appearances.

"H-How did it go...?"

"It'll be fine, Kikyou. I'm not going anywhere." I figured that hearing it from me would be best, so I took the liberty of answering.

"Really...? Your dad had a really scary look when I saw him, so he might come back. Is there anything I can do to help?"

I gently placed my hand on top of her head.

"There's nothing to worry about. No matter how powerful he is, he can't just do whatever he wants in this school. I'm not dropping out."

"Okay... I trust you," she nodded.

"Well, there you have it. The school will do its best to protect Kiyotaka-kun."

"Thank you very much, Chairman Sakayanagi."

Kikyou subtly glanced in my direction after I said the chairman's name. Her bright fabricated smile returned. She understood that I deliberately fed that information to her. Unfortunately, the chairman moved the conversation further before she could say anything.

"Now then, Kushida-kun."

"Chairman, please call me Kikyou if possible. I'd feel a lot more comfortable that way since you're calling Kiyotaka-kun by his first name as well."

"I understand," the chairman smiled. "Now then, Kikyou-kun, the reason why I wanted to chat with you is to conduct a little survey. As much as I'm embarrassed to admit, I haven't had the time to converse with any first-year student this year-- not counting the talk I had with Kiyotaka-kun back in June."

"That's wonderful!" In an instant, Kikyou's enthusiasm permeated the entire room. "I've always had a funny impression of executive people because of TV and the internet. But I think Chairman Sakayanagi is different. You care about your students more than anyone-- at least, that's how I feel after seeing your resolve to protect Kiyotaka-kun."

"You flatter me. I'm just doing my responsibility as the head of administration."

Without much effort, Kikyou took control of the conversation. I'm sure the chairman had noticed, but he's just letting it happen.

"Not at all! I genuinely think that any other chairman would just ask their subordinates to conduct a sloppy survey to get depthless answers. But despite your busy schedule, you made this encounter into an opportunity to personally get to know some students," she explained. "If my perspective could be of help, then please ask me anything."

Something was different. Kikyou's angelic personality was still at the forefront, but I can clearly see her harsh and honest self alongside it.

"The same goes for me. I'd like to contribute, if possible," I chimed in.

"Very well. I feel sorry for taking up your time, but if it's no trouble, then I'd love to hear your thoughts." The chairman leaned in to face us. "Then first, I'll ask a normal question. What do you think of this school?"

Kikyou and I looked at each other. I slightly nodded, urging her to answer first.

"I think this school is amazing," she said. "The school itself is very lavish and convenient, but I also understand that it's part of the design. I don't think the funding would put heavy emphasis on a student's quality of life unless it's trying to achieve something."

Even Chabashira-sensei looked intrigued. It was a completely different answer from the one she gave back in October.

"Of course, as a normal high school girl, I'm happy that I can still make friends. Everyday is fun, and I don't regret enrolling here," she ended her answer with a beaming smile.

"How about you, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"It's a very unique school. A classmate of ours described this place as a paradise. I think that's what everyone thought in their first month. As Kikyou had said, the campus is filled with top-class facilities, and the students will get a large amount of monthly allowance. The fact that we don't have to pay tuition is unreal."

"Did that image break after the first month?"

"It did, but only for some. Our class, in particular, was disillusioned on the very first day."

This school remained a paradise for those who were competent. With the existence of class competitions and special exams, the students are forced to fight the battle for merit, which the competent ones are more than happy to participate in.

"Thank you for your insight." The chairman sipped his tea. "Now then, for my next question, what do you think of your peers? Specifically, what do you think of the students from other classes?"

"I... honestly don't know how to answer that," replied Kikyou. "I have a lot of friends who belong outside my class, so I can't think of them as enemies. But... I want my class to win, so I'll compete with them fair and square when the situation calls for it."

"It's pretty much the same for me," I followed.

"That's great. While I can't deny that the school's current system invites conflict between classes. I still think it's best to get along with students outside your class."

Inter-class competition can already be seen in normal schools, but ANHS takes it to a whole new level.

"Then, for my last question," Chairman Sakayanagi leaned back and fixed his eyes on us. "If you were given the chance to change classes, would you take it?"

After hearing that, there's no way Chabashira-sensei could remain unperturbed. Trying her best to stay calm, she poured another cup of tea for herself.

"I'm happy with my class right now," Kikyou answered with a smile. "I don't want to be apart from them, and I think we have what it takes to win in the end."

"That's a beautiful answer," the chairman nodded with a satisfied look. "What about you, Kiyotaka-kun?"

I could feel Chabashira-sensei's anticipation which was pretty amusing.

"It depends. I'd prefer to be in a class that's most convenient for me."

"Ahaha, that sounds like an honest answer." He chuckled at my response.

"Ah, if Kiyotaka-kun changes classes, I'll probably do my best to follow him there!" Kikyou announced with a mischievous grin.

"Oh? Your friendship runs deep."

"Hmm... I think I'd still chase him even if we weren't friends though," she argued.

"And why is that?" asked the chairman.

"Because any class would win as long as Kiyotaka-kun is in it."

Kikyou's innocent smile didn't help lessen the impact of her statement. I don't know about Chabashira-sensei, but I'm sure the chairman agrees with her.

"You're exaggerating again," I said.

"Heehee, am I?"

Strictly speaking, she was right. But that's under the assumption that I'd contribute to the class. If anything, I can choose to be the

reason for a class's downfall.

As I escaped that train of thought, the chairman put his empty glass on the table.

"Well, thank you for answering my questions, dear students. I've finally got a decent grasp of our freshmen's mindset. Of course, I also understand that the two of you are very unique, so your insights may not be similar to most. However, that in itself is also fine."

"It's no problem, Chairman. I'm glad we could be of help." Kikyou's bright smile stayed until the very end.

"Mhm. It's easy to discern why the two of you are among the pillars of your class," he explained. "And Kikyou-kun, I can see why Kiyotaka-kun cares about you a lot."

"E-Eh, what...?" Kikyou blushed, reflexively turning to me.

"I guess he means I care about my friends a lot."

"O-Oh, I see."

"But the two of you are more than friends, no?"

"Wha-?" Kikyou nearly flinched before tugging my blazer.

"I think he's saying that we're best friends."

"Ohh, o-of course!"

I looked at Chairman Sakayanagi who had a suspicious grin on his face.

"Please stop teasing her, Chairman."

I knew that while Kikyou's bashfulness was genuine, she was also deliberately making herself vulnerable to increase her likability as a person. To her, subconsciously doing something like this was almost as easy as breathing. Even I only came to understand this recently.

Her charisma was different from Ichinose, but it might just be as potent.

"Ahaha, please forgive me for being a bit playful. The two of you just reminded me of my youth."

In the corner of my eye, I saw Kikyou getting ready to say something. But just as she was about to speak, the chairman suddenly grabbed his phone from his pocket.

"Ah, how unfortunate. It seems like there's more work for me to do. It's a good thing that we've finished our discussion before then," Chairman Sakayanagi stood up and straightened his suit. "Thank you for your time, Kiyotaka-kun, Kikyou-kun. I hope you the two of you can keep up your excellence. Chabashira-sensei, please accompany the two of them here while I contact the principal."

"I'll see you out, Chairman. Stay here, you two. I'll be back," she said.

"If things don't go well for the two of you, I'll make use of the favor that you owe me in the future. Alright, Kiyotaka-kun?" The

chairman took his exit with those parting words.

Click The closed door sounded.

Kikyou and I bowed as the two of them left the office.

As soon as the two of them were out of sight, Kikyou immediately poked my side.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"I see."

"What did the chairman mean at the end...?" she asked.

"I honestly have no idea."

"I see..."

I wasn't lying. Kikyou should be able to see that.

"You were about to say something to the Chairman, weren't you?"

"Aha, you noticed? I wanted some information on Sakayanagi-san, but it was really hard to ask him something personal without it sounding too out of nowhere."

"You're such a hard worker," I sighed.

"Oh, please. That was exactly what you wanted me to do." Kikyou sneered at me with a smug grin. "You wouldn't have mentioned his name otherwise."

She instantly understood my intentions.

"Well, that was pretty unlucky."

"I know, right? I finally found an opportunity for a perfect segue, but his phone just had to start buzzing," she groaned. "Ugh, if only I knew about his name from the start, then I could've easily veered the conversation in that direction when we were talking about rules and relatives!"

Chabashira-sensei came back shortly, opening the door.

"You two are dismissed. You're free to go home now. I'll receive the principal's return."

And with that, Kikyou and I grabbed our bags from the classroom and began walking home.

"Do you wanna eat something on the way?" she asked.

"I'm up for some ice cream."

"You're always up for some ice cream, Kiyotaka-kun..."

My father's visit and that talk with Chairman Sakayanagi felt like a fever dream that came and went. Everything ended abruptly, and Kikyou and I had no say in it whatsoever.

Hopefully, I don't need to think about them for a while after this.

SS.28 - Crossroads

December 15th, Wednesday.

At dusk, Kikyou and I walked through a path lined with trees. I looked up and exhaled. White steam curled from my mouth and vanished into the night sky.

"Cold," I muttered.

"Well, you *did* just eat some ice cream in this freezing season..." Kikyou commented.

Every time I breathed out, that white steam rose into the air. I exhaled and inhaled over and over again. I tended to forget because of the extreme temperature fluctuations from day to day, but winter was here. Last year, around this time, I'd always been indoors. Now, I'm walking home from school with my best friend.

"I still can't wrap my head around how you girls can wear a skirt in this condition."

"It is very cold, but you just kinda get used to it."

"I'm confident about my resistance to cold, but girls are on another level. You're just built different."

"Well..." Kikyou subtly leaned on me while fiddling with her hair. "If you want, we can warm up each oth-"

"Seriously, right when you became student council president, our relationship flatlined, Miyabi. Ahahah!" A girl suddenly crossed paths with us, but she continued talking as if we weren't there. "C'mon, I'm joking, I'm joking. Besides, it's not like I'm angry or anything. But I *am* going to ask you to treat me in celebration, so be prepared!"

Like Kikyou, her thighs peeked out from beneath her skirt. I caught the fragrant scent of shampoo on her waist-length hair.

"Student council? Sorry, but I'll pass. I'm not interested. Besides, you still haven't settled things with the former student council president, have you? Wait, what? Why are you suddenly confessing your feelings for me? C'mon, I know you've made passes at lots of other girls. Well, if you win against Horikita-senpai, *then* I'll consider it, okay? Talk to you later!"

I don't know about Kikyou, but I didn't *want* to eavesdrop. With how loudly she was talking though... I don't think I had much of a choice. Her chocolate brown hair was familiar, and with the names mentioned in her conversation, I could only match her identity with

one person.

The girl finished her phone call and exhaled deeply, steam escaping her mouth. She continued walking some steps in front of us while still not noticing our presence.

"Jeez, that Miyabi. Getting all cocky. Still, Horikita-senpai can't possibly expect what Miyabi is up to this time. In the end, he'll most likely..." She snuck a quick glance behind as she finally felt that people were walking with her. "... win."

After confirming our existence, the girl started walking faster, almost as if she was embarrassed. Everything was well and good, but when she reached the fork in the road where the path split off towards the dormitories for each year level, her foot slipped on the icy pavement and she took a truly impressive tumble to the ground.

"Wah!"

Kikyou, who had stayed silent the entire time, immediately ran to her rescue.

"Nazuna-senpai, are you okay?!"

As expected, the girl was indeed Asahina Nazuna of Class 2-A. She immediately got up and turned to us with a red face. I also made my way to them and noticed something on the ground.

"K-Kikyou-chan...?!"

It seems like they know each other already.

"That seemed like a bad fall. Are you hurt?" she asked, looking very concerned.

"No, no, I'm okay... I think."

A red charm lay on the road where Asahina had tripped. I picked it up and wondered if she dropped it.

"Um, is this yours?" I extended my arm towards her and showed the amulet.

"Hm?" She patted her pocket as soon as she saw it. "Ah, yes. That's mine."

Asahina grabbed it from me and clasped it with both of her hands. She looked happy after receiving it.

"Thank you, uhh... Oh, wait. You're the boy who beat Miyabi and Horikita-senpai!"

"Miyabi?" I asked, pretending not to know who Nagumo was.

"Ahaha, nevermind. But still, thank you for picking this up for me. And thank you for worrying about me, Kikyou-chan."

"Oh, no, it's nothing. I'm glad you're okay," she replied.

"I didn't expect you to be the ones walking behind me though. I was embarrassed when I noticed that some people heard me rambling earlier, so I started hightailing it. But I just humiliated myself even more!" Asahina laughed. "Haha, sorry you had to see that!"

She seemed like the type of person who's quick to judge others but has the guts to honestly confront them if needed.

"It happens to best of us, Senpai. I'm also a bit of a klutz sometimes."

"Ahh, you're such an angel, Kikyou-chan. I wish I had a little sister like you!" Asahina cried, hugging Kikyou. "And your name is... Ayanokouji...kun, right?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"I see... Hey, can I ask you a question?"

Kikyou and I subtly glanced at each other. We've been through this kind of situation many times before.

"This might be a bit personal, but are you and Kikyou-chan a thing?"

I honestly thought I wouldn't hear that question again after the sports festival. Asahina was the first one who'd broken that streak of silence.

"We're just friends," I answered.

For some reason, Kikyou wasn't saying anything.

"Sorry, you must be tired of hearing it already. I already knew that you two were just friends, but Kikyou-chan had a suspicious reaction when I asked her a few days ago, so I thought I'd ask you too."

Ah, so that's why.

"I told you, we're just friends..." Kikyou muttered with a little pout.

"Ehhh. It would be funny if you started going out though. I didn't really pay attention before because I wasn't friends with Kikyou-chan yet, but I heard from my other female friends that a lot of second-year boys were talking smack about Ayanokouji-kun."

"N-Nazuna-senpai, is that true?" Kikyou asked with a surprised tone even though she probably already knew about it.

"Yep! Even Succhii knew about it."

"Even Moeka-senpai did?"

"Well, they were kinda forced to swallow their own words after Ayankouji-kun's performance during the sports festival. At the same time, a lot of them got even more motivated to prove that they're better than a mere first-year," she shrugged "Really, boys are a bunch of kids."

"They really are sometimes, aren't they?"

Careful with your tone there, Kikyou. Your mask might slip.

"It can't be helped. Kikyou-chan is just too cute, after all." After one last squeeze, she finally let go. "I'll get going now. Sorry about the embarrassing display, and sorry for bothering you. See you around, Kikyou-chan, Ayanokouji-kun!"

We watched as Asahina jogged her way to the second-years' dorm building. I'm glad she didn't slip and fall this time.

"And there she goes. She didn't even give me a chance to get some information out of her. What a pity," Kikyou sighed, her angelic self nowhere to be seen.

"I didn't know you were close," I said.

"It only happened recently. I thought I'd try to talk to her to know more about the thing with Miyamoto-kun."

That was around last month. It only took a month for her to be able to act like that around Asahina.

"The fact that you can become close with a popular second-year as long as you will it-- You really are amazing."

"You can praise me more," she smiled haughtily before pinching my side. "But do you think I'd forget about the fact that you took a nice long glance underneath her skirt when she fell?"

"I didn't. It was simply right in my line of sight. There was nothing I could've done. If I turned away, then I'd look more suspicious. Wouldn't it be better to just act like I wasn't seeing anything?"

"Kiyotaka-kun, you could've just denied it, you know...?" Kikyou was giving me a weird look.

It seems like my response had the opposite effect.

Vol. 7: Chapter 6.1 - Trying to Live

The next day, Chabashira-sensei called for me to iron out the details.

"I guess everything went according to your plan yesterday, huh?" she commented.

"It's not like I had any plans in the first place. I didn't expect that man to come here this time."

"But you probably expected him to come someday."

"That's true. He's annoyingly persistent for an adult."

"And about Kushida..."

Under the guise of an academic meeting, Chabashira-sensei and I quietly chatted about everything that transpired.

"She should be fine. Let's just hope that her face doesn't stick in that man's memory or she might become a target."

"Is that so...?"

Around 24 hours earlier...

We tread through the hallways of offices, and after a few minutes, the two of us stopped in front of a door.

"Chabashira-sensei, before we go in, I'd appreciate it if you could do something for me."

"What is it?"

Horikita called for everyone's attention right after Chabashira-sensei and I left the classroom. I knew that because her voice could still be heard a few meters from the door. In that case...

"You'd probably be on standby outside the room, right?" I asked.

"Yes, that's correct."

"The class is probably having a meeting right now. If I don't return after they finish, there's a good chance that Kikyou will come and find me," I said. "Do the other teachers know about his visit?"

"Mashima-sensei knows, and there's a chance that he might tell Chie if she pesters him enough."

"I see. Since Kikyou will head to the teachers' faculty first, she'll eventually make her way here."

I doubt they'd tell her about that man's visit, but asking for Chabashira-sensei's location is a different matter.

Hearing that, her expression changed. She finally understood that I had something in mind.

"What do you want me to do with her?"

"If she comes, tell her that I'm talking to my father."

"That's a surprise. I thought you wanted me to hide the truth from her. Is it really okay?"

"I've opened up to her a little bit back then. She already has an idea about what kind of person my so-called *"father"* is."

"I see," she sighed. "And then?"

"I'm sure that that man wants me to leave this school," I shrugged. "When Kikyou gets here, you don't have to tell her that my father is explicitly asking me to drop out. You can just hint at my potential departure."

I'm a hundred percent sure that Kikyou remembers our conversation that night, so she'd probably get what's going on even if Chabashira-sensei doesn't spell it out. Leaving things up to her imagination is a lot more effective.

"One last thing. The chairman had promised to help me out, so he might be able to drive my father away. Once he gets out of this room, do *not* talk to him, and that's especially true for Kikyou."

"Why...?" Chabashira-sensei grew nervous.

"Given Kikyou's personality, she might be polite enough to introduce herself to him. That man can't have her name no matter what. I don't really have the time to explain everything, but if that happens, the safety of Kikyou and her family might be put in jeopardy."

"It's that dangerous...?" she asked with an anxious face.

I honestly don't think so, but if he finds out that Kikyou is a close friend of mine, he might get annoying ideas about going after her in some way just to mess with me. I'd like to avoid that if possible.

"Yes," I nodded. "I'll be counting on you."

After nodding back, Chabashira-sensei spoke towards the door.

"Principal, I've brought Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun."

End of flashback.

"So, do you think that'll be the end of it?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"I hope so."

Given his last words, I'm sure he'll try to pull something. It's a headache more than anything. I can't believe I have to worry about something else on top of what I have to worry about now.

I wonder if living a normal high school life for three years is impossible for me.

"Please excuse us," said a pair of students.

They went inside the teachers' faculty and approached Mashima-sensei's table. If I remember correctly, their names are Sanada

Kousei and Morishita Ai. Seeing the sheets of paper in their hands, they must've been doing some mundane tasks that I, as a fellow student, got inevitably used to.

My phone suddenly vibrated. I picked it up and saw that someone had messaged me.

"Well then, Sensei, please do your best to make sure things go smoothly for them. It'll be much more of a pain if things get derailed."

"As a teacher, I should've reported this matter to the higher-ups the moment I found out about it."

"And now, you're an indirect accomplice for keeping it a secret."

"Since they managed to take it this far, they must've bought out the cooperation of the personnel in charge. What exactly is their plan? Why are they putting those things in that place?"

"So they can use them, obviously."

"Against you?"

"Exactly," I nodded.

Chabashira-sensei sighed, looking severely exasperated. At least, now we're sure where this final confrontation will happen.

With that out of the way, it's finally time to help out a friend.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun is here!" Azuma waved at me. Ichihashi greeted me and did the same.

A group of students were waiting for me near the school gate.

"Sorry for making you guys wait," I said.

"It's fine, it's fine. We're not in a rush," Mori dismissed my apology with a smile.

"We didn't really wait that long," followed Ryuuko.

"Let's get going, shall we?" Mori pointed in Keyaki Mall's direction with a grin.

The four girls walked side-by-side while happily chatting with each other.

I looked to the side and the last person in the group was looking at me with a guilty smile.

"Sorry about this, Kiyotaka," said Eita.

"It's alright. I didn't have plans anyway."

Earlier today, Eita asked me if I could accompany them after school. With Christmas being nine days from now, I suppose it was time to start doing some gift shopping.

"Nene and the others will probably just go window-shopping for a bit before heading to Palette. I'm pretty sure they'll buy gifts on the weekend," Eita started walking ahead of me as he spoke. "I'm a bit

uncomfortable being alone with so many girls, so I asked you to come."

That was an obvious lie.

"I'm having a hard time believing that," I said.

"Really? I thought it was a perfectly natural thing to say."

"I guess so, but it doesn't apply to you."

"Haha, you're probably right," he chuckled.

"So? Is there a problem?" I asked.

Eita slowed down and waited for me to catch up.

"It's not really a *problem*."

"That's a relief then."

The conversation came to a halt. We silently walked behind the girls who looked like they didn't have a care in the world.

"Nene and I started dating yesterday. Officially." Eita spoke softly.

"Congratulations. Frankly speaking, it was just a matter of time."

"You're the only one that I'm telling about it. Everyone else can find out naturally. It's not like Nene and I are trying to hide it, so we'll honestly answer anyone who asks."

"I think that's great. I'm happy for the two of you," I kept my gaze forward after giving him a genuine reply. "But there's a reason why you told me, right? I'm going to guess that it's related to why you asked me to be here."

"You're as sharp as usual. Don't worry though. I'm not trying to do anything weird. I just want to give you some advice."

"Advice?"

"Back then, I asked if you cared about the class. In the end, I didn't really get an answer. But then I realized that I was asking you the wrong question." Eita turned to me with a warm smile. "Kiyotaka... You're just trying to live, aren't you?"

For once, I felt like someone understood me a little.

"You're probably right," I answered. "But there's a lot that I don't understand, so my priorities might seem out of order."

Eita slapped my back with a chuckle.

"Did you have it rough back in the day?" he asked.

"You could say that. But on second thought, I honestly don't think it was that bad. In fact, I'm thankful for all the things I got from my past."

"But it doesn't change the fact that you don't consider the 'you' back then to be *"living"*. Otherwise, you wouldn't have answered the way you did just now."

"I guess so. This was the first place where I can honestly say I feel most alive."

"Haha, in that case, being a class leader must've been a pain. You

won't be able to experience as much fun as a regular student with all the annoying responsibilities."

"That comes with the job."

"I'm grateful for it though. We got promoted to Class A because of you," he said with an annoying grin.

"So? What's the advice?" I asked.

Eita twisted his frame and faced me. His eyes lit up as he spread his arms.

"If you want to live your high school life to the fullest, then you have to get a girlfriend!"

His voice was powerful, but it wasn't loud, so the girls didn't hear him.

"That's your advice...?"

"What's with that face? It's the Christmas season, Kiyotaka. Spending it with the girl you love is the best thing ever!" He passionately declaimed. "That said, we're the same type of guy. You probably won't be satisfied if it's just a random stranger. You gotta have that bond first."

"So that's why you brought me here?"

"Hmm, I can't say any more, but I feel like making you aware of it is enough for now. Well then, let's catch up to the others!"

Without giving me a chance to reply, Eita grabbed my arm and started dragging me forward.

Vol. 7: Chapter 6.2 - Treasuring Connections

"Eh? Really? Finally?!" Ichihashi's excited voice betrayed her usual coolness.

"R-Ruri, you're getting too worked up!" Mori tried to calm her down with a red face.

"That's really nice, isn't it?" Ryuuko said with a gentle smile. "And Christmas is coming too. I'm sure you'll have lots of fun together."

"How dreamy. The two of you have been close friends ever since the first semester, right?" asked Azuma.

"Well, yes..."

"Everyone thought it was just a matter of time, to be honest. I'm glad the two of you are finally together."

"Thanks, Ryuuko..."

"Ahaha, I feel bad for that one Class D girl who has a big crush on Kikuchi-kun though," said Azuma.

"E-Eh?" Mori looked surprised.

"I didn't know that! Who is it?" asked Ichihashi.

"Hmmm... I actually can't recall her name, but she wears glasses..." Azuma poked her chin.

"There are only two girls with glasses in Class D, I think. If I remember correctly, it's Mineshima-san and Wada-san." Ryuuko lowered her voice.

"Uhh, maybe it's Wada-san?"

"Now, now, it doesn't matter at this point. Let's just celebrate Nene's victory!" Ichihashi clapped her hands twice and veered the topic back.

Azuma took a long sip from her frappuccino before asking an outrageous question.

"So? Did you kiss?"

"W-Wait, Sana, you shouldn't ask that so suddenly!" Mori hectically waved her hands in a panic.

"She didn't deny it! Kyahh~!"

The girls continued being giddy about their conversation.

"They do realize that we can hear them, right?" grumbled Eita.

Our group sat in the outer area of Palette. Voices usually scatter in an open place like this, especially in a bustling location near the

mall, so it wasn't as risky to talk normally compared to being inside. That said, Eita and I were still in their proximity, even if we sat at different tables.

"They don't, but that's probably my fault. They were gauging my reactions to see if we could hear them, but I don't think my face would change no matter what they said."

Eita was in front of me, which meant that they could only see his back. If our positions were reversed, they would've seen his slightly flushed face.

"Well, it's not all bad. It's nice to hear my girlfriend being all bashful while talking about me."

"Are you bragging?"

"I am," he smirked.

We were originally seated together, but the girls wanted to have some girl talk, so they shooed us away for a bit-- not that it made a difference.

"If you were good at sports, you would've embodied the normie that every rom-com protagonist hated," I said.

"Man, I *wish* I was good at sports though. I've never been athletic since I was a kid."

"You had a good run during PE, remember?"

"That was thanks to my daily jogging and workout! Oh, that's right. You haven't been jogging lately, Kiyotaka."

Eita improved a lot in a couple of months. He's probably just a tiny bit less athletic than Makida now. (1)

"I switched to just working out in my room because of the cold, but I'll probably go back at it once the new year comes."

"We can run together if that's the case. Though honestly, I'm tempted to just hit the gym. I don't think it'd hurt our points at all."

I've actually thought about using the gym at the start, but apart from saving as many points as possible for important things (like appliances, games, light novels, manga, and maybe the class bank), I didn't want to be noticed by others just yet. That's why I wear a hooded jacket whenever I jog in the morning. If a fellow student sees me, they won't easily recognize who I am.

Nevertheless, I think it's about time I got back to lifting some weights.

"Maybe that's a good idea," I nodded.

"Sweet! Let's sign up for it soon. I'll ask Haku and the others if they wanna join."

"I wonder if I should ask Ken and Akito as well?"

"Why not? The more the merrier. The gym is really big, so I don't think it'll be a problem."

Somehow, the image of us being gym bros just popped up in my

head. It looked a little silly.

"Well, the gym talk can wait. Let's talk about something else." He was making a dubious grin which made me feel uneasy.

"And by something else, you mean..."

"Your type of girl, of course. We're trying to get you a girlfriend, remember? Kushida and Horikita are the exact opposite, so it's kinda tricky."

"I can understand if it's with Kikyō, but why would Horikita be in the conversation?"

"C'mon, we're just talking about hypothetical stuff. What's the harm?"

"Whatever. It's not like this is the first time I've had this conversation with someone."

"Yeah, I'd assume someone like Sudou or Karuizawa would ask you about this."

"It's scary how you named the right people."

Eita shrugged with a proud smile.

"Well? What do you have to say? You've interacted with lots of girls since we entered this school. You must have some favorable impressions towards at least one of them. If you were given the chance to date someone, who would it be?"

I took a sip from my coffee frappé and thought about it for a bit.

"Hmm... I think I'd want to date someone who's a bit of an opposite of me."

"Ohh, that's vague, but at least it's better than saying "spirited", right?"

Again, with that grin. It made me remember Matsushita's annoying smile on the island. How in the world did he even know about that answer? I wanted to ask him, but I realized it soon after.

"I guess having a girlfriend who's friends with most girls has some nice perks-- having access to gossip details, for example."

"Heh, you have Kushida for that though."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"With the way she acts around you sometimes, having no label hardly makes a difference. The guys who like her would kill you if they could."

"I can feel their stares in the hallway sometimes, especially when I'm with Kikyō. I'd rather be shunned and ignored, to be honest. But I got used to it. Anyone would if it became an everyday occurrence since the first semester."

"Well, it is what it is. This is Kushida Kikyō we're talking about-- the angel of Class A. Even some upperclassmen are still trying their luck." Eita's eyes became serious as he continued. "Level with me, Kiyotaka. You can be dense sometimes, but you're not dumb. You've

noticed Kushida's feelings, right?"

I leaned my back on the chair before answering.

"I have, for a while now. But it's not like I can do anything about it."

I can't just confront her. It's a bit more complicated than that.

"You're not avoiding her at all, and you don't look uncomfortable when she gets close to you. Are you sure you're not harboring the same feelings?"

"I can't really say for certain."

"So you don't know. Fine, I'll believe that. In this case, you're probably in what we call a *"situationship"*. Ever heard of it?"

"No," I shook my head.

My close friends who are knowledgeable on that stuff, namely Kikyuu and Karuizawa, hadn't mentioned that term to me yet. I haven't encountered it online or in stories either.

"It's basically a label for a romantic relationship *without* a label. Ironic, isn't it?" he chuckled.

"And you think it applies to us?"

"I know you're not really the type to get physical with his partner in public, but for better or worse, you're also the type to let your girl do whatever she pleases," he explained. "Don't get me wrong. Kushida isn't a very touchy person, but she's different when it's with you. I'm sure you've noticed that."

There's no way I wouldn't. Kikyuu might use her charm to deceive others into liking her, but she'll rarely engage in actual contact with anyone, especially boys.

"I guess you're right," I nodded in agreement. "You're so knowledgeable about this, aren't you?"

"Believe it or not, I was a pretty popular guy in middle school. I wasn't good at sports and my grades were terrible, but I made up for it by being friends with a lot of people. That's where I learned all sorts of things."

"That's amazing. It couldn't have been easy."

"Yeah, but I was pretty lucky on some parts. My family owned a bathhouse, and quite a number of students attending the middle school I went to live near my area. They and their families would come to our place and take a bath sometimes. And me, being the first son, would often look after the place."

"So that's how Kikuchi Eita became popular, huh?"

"That was the catalyst. I tried making more friends in school and it worked pretty well."

"I guess we're both lucky. I made a lot of friends mainly because of Kikyuu, Karuizawa, and Hirata introducing me to their group."

"You're not giving yourself enough credit. You made friends with

Miyake and the others without any help, and you became close with someone like Ichinose Honami. Any guy can't just do that."

Before Tuski and I could continue the conversation, Ryuuko called out to us.

"Kiyotaka-kun, Kikuchi-kun, you can sit with us now," she said.

"Oh, done with the girl talk? I was just starting to enjoy Nene's embarrassed answers," teased Eita.

"W-Wha-?! You could hear us?!" Of course, Mori freaked out.

After that, we started talking about other things. Slowly but surely, the food and drinks we ordered will be consumed. Even then, we still continued our conversations until the sun started setting.

"Well then, Ruri and I will buy something before we go home! Goodbye, everyone!" Azuma happily bid her farewell.

"I had lots of fun today. See you guys tomorrow!" followed Ichihashi.

After the two girls left, Mori took the initiative for their own goodbye.

"Eita and I will head straight home. What about you two?"

"What's your plan, Kiyotaka-kun?" Ryuuko asked with a smile.

We still have school tomorrow, but it's not like there's anything important to discuss. Most of them are just trying to give us some homework.

"I don't have any," I replied while shaking my head.

"Alright then. You two can go home together. We'll be going now." Eita pulled Nene and started walking away. "Bye, Nishimura, Kiyotaka!"

"I'll see you again tomorrow, Ryuuko. You too, Ayanokouji-kun. Bye-bye~!"

I guess they all looked casual enough.

"We could've walked home together, but I guess they wanted some alone time on the way back," Ryuuko chuckled.

"Yeah."

"That, or they're all being oddly considerate."

"Yeah."

"Sana too-- even Ruri."

"Yeah."

Ryuuko and I knew what was up.

She started walking in front of me and headed in a certain direction. At this point, the sun has disappeared from our sight-- its light no longer shining anywhere on this side of the planet. Thankfully, the moon had come to our rescue, providing its own light during this time.

But still, in this season, even the early evening looks like the middle of the night.

"Do you have any plans for Christmas?" she asked.

I started walking a few paces behind her.

"Not really. Maybe Ken and the others might invite me to hang out. If not, then maybe I'll be the one who'd invite them," I replied. "What about you?"

It was the 16th of December today. I don't know if it's the right time to plan out your Christmas vacation, but it shouldn't be too late unless you're cooking up something big.

"To be honest, I don't know. I've spent all of my Christmas days with my family."

That must've been nice.

"Did you give each other gifts?" I asked.

"We did. It was really fun, especially when I was little. What about you, Kiyotaka-kun?"

Ryuuko's long, flowy hair danced as the wind blew. The cold breeze of a December night wasn't easy to handle, especially for a girl who wore a skirt. However, Ryuuko's modest strides perfectly complimented her elegant figure. It's like she was perfectly warm.

"We didn't really have that tradition. To me, Christmas was just another day."

"You were overseas, right? I thought Christmas was a global celebration though, not counting some religions, of course."

"That's what happens when your parents are absent," I shrugged.

"I did celebrate it last year though. If anything, the food was great."

Ryuuko turned around excitedly. However, she stopped herself from saying anything before donning a somber smile.

We finally reached the edge of this city-like campus where the view of the ocean could be seen without any restraint.

(Reference: Classroom of the Elite - Season 1 - Episode 3)

"If you're planning to hang out with your friends on Christmas, then you don't have a girlfriend to spend it with, right?" Her face had no hint of sarcasm or playfulness.

"No, I don't."

"Then, can I be your girlfriend?"

I can only imagine the amount of courage it took for her to utter those words. In fact, if it wasn't for the lesson I'd learned from Ichihashi's confession, I would've made the same mistake of misinterpreting her calmness as composure.

"We can spend Christmas together. I'll cook your favorite food for you. We can hang out. We can talk all night, or we can just watch

something in silence. I'll be beside you. I'll give my time to you."

Her feelings are precious. Any man would've said yes in an instant, and they probably wouldn't regret that decision for the rest of their lives. Ryuuko was a beautiful and kind girl. She's very mature and understanding. She was smart, diligent, and responsible. She's a great cook, and her voice is immaculate. If I accept her confession, then I'd probably have a very fulfilling high school romance.

But that wouldn't be fair for such an amazing person like her.

"I'm sorry, Ryuuko. I don't think I can return your feelings."

The moment I uttered those words, tears began to form in her eyes. I can't do anything about it. I can only let those tears fall.

"I'm very happy that you feel that way about me. I'm thankful," I spoke without wavering. "But I don't feel the same way. You're an amazing person, and frankly speaking, I don't think I deserve to be asked out by you. That's why I'm going to tell you my true feelings. You're a great friend, but I don't think I can give anything more than that."

Despite the continuous stream of tears, Ryuuko's calm expression never broke.

"Mhm, I understand. Thank you for telling me that," she said. "I honestly expected this already. I always felt that you didn't see me that way."

"I'm just weird. Any guy in their right mind wouldn't reject someone like you."

Ryuuko chuckled as she wiped her tears away.

"Thank you for being honest with me, Kiyotaka-kun. It hurts, but I confessed knowing that I'll probably get rejected... because I want to stay friends with you."

"I never intended to stop being friends. Even if you started avoiding me, I wouldn't think that we're not friends anymore. I'll just wait until we can finally talk again."

Thanks to Kikyoku's harsh scolding (due to my lackluster response to Ichihashi and Inogashira's confessions), I finally got some clues on how to better articulate what I thought about a girl that I just rejected. I can confidently say that my words are the truth.

"I'm really... glad that I confessed." The smile on her face finally returned.

Ryuuko, like Haruka and the rest of my closest friends, didn't mind a boring person like me. I want to treasure them in a way that I can.

"Say, Kiyotaka-kun... Can we walk home together?"

"Of course," I replied.

The two of us started strolling along the iron fences side by side.

I don't know if I did things right this time, but I don't think it'll be the last time I'd hurt someone like this. I've come to accept that reality.

Author's Notes:

Rank by Athleticism:

1. Sudou
2. Ayanokouji (*nerfed himself, of course*)
3. Hirata
4. Minami (*Setsuya*)
5. Miyake
6. Makida
 - Nishimura Ryuuko tentative illust. from the light novel series: **"Osananajimi kara no Renai Soudan. Aite wa Oreppoi kedo Chigaurashii"**.

Vol. 7: Chapter 7.1 - Requests

December 18th, Saturday.

I picked up a damp cloth I'd been using to mop up dirt and dust and threw it in the garbage bag. After washing my hands, I sat on my bed, listening to the creak of the springs.

Since it was December, I decided to use the weekend for some end-of-year cleaning. I wasn't much of a packrat, but it took over half a day to finish everything. Well, the main reason was obvious. My room had become some sort of hub for different people to hang out.

That said, I wonder if I had managed to return my room to the pristine condition it was in when I first moved here.

"A clean room is such a great thing," I muttered.

I turned on my teakettle, thinking that I would take a little breather. I was somewhat hesitant about using the sparkling cup I'd just washed, but there was no other option. While waiting for the water to boil, I took out my phone.

"Guess I'll have some tea."

My cabinets overflowed with tea bags. Since I had all kinds of visitors stobbing by, I'd amassed an extensive range of supplies from coffee to black tea to green tea and roasted tea.

I turned my head to the side and saw the reusable bags that I kept. Half of them belonged to Karuizawa who helped me shop for supplies yesterday.

Just as I put a black tea bag into my cup, someone buzzed from the first floor.

A classmate would've rang my doorbell, so who could this be? I went to check the screen and found myself looking at a surprising face. I could've pretended to be away, but there's no point in doing that right now. After all, this was someone I'd been thinking about seeing myself, and he'd already come all the way out here.

"I'd like a moment of your time. Or should I come back later?" my visitor asked through the intercom.

"Nah, now's a good time," I replied.

It was Horikita's older brother, who'd served as the student council president until recently. What an unusual visitor. I buzzed him into the building and poured boiling water into my cup while I waited.

Soon after, the doorbell rang and I opened the door.

"I'd prefer to speak privately, so please come in."

"I agree."

If Horikita saw her brother and I chatting in the hallway, she'd cause a fuss. Besides, I wanted to avoid being seen with the former student council president as much as possible.

The older Horikita noticed my tea as soon as he entered.

"I just thought I'd make myself something to drink," I said.

We made our way to the dining area and took our seats. I fetched another cup and served him some tea. I probably should've asked, but he would've stopped me before I could open the cupboard if he didn't want it.

"For a 1st-year, you keep your room quite clean," he said.

"You just came at a good time," I replied, hinting that I cleaned my room today.

I was debating on whether I should tell him or not, but he probably already deduced that after seeing the garbage bag full of damp paper towels.

"To come all the way to the 1st-years' dorm... What's your business with me, former student council president?"

"The second semester ends next week. My time at this school is running out."

True. The 3rd-years had a little over two months left. It'd be over in the blink of an eye.

"There's something I wanted to tell you before I leave-- about Nagumo Miyabi."

Nagumo Miyabi was the leader of Class 2-A and the current student council president. We'd only ever interacted twice, and on both times, the two of us never really talked directly with each other. If he's going to be my opponent, then I'd welcome any information about him.

"I appreciate it. Kiryuuin-senpai didn't really tell me anything substantial."

"Kiryuuin? When did she make contact with you?"

"During the sports festival," I replied.

"That was fast. I only told her about you the day before that."

Well, she did seem excited.

"Kiryuuin-senpai said that her goal was to be entertained. I assumed you told her about me because you were confident she wouldn't sabotage you?"

"Right. She isn't the type of person who would do that. Like Nagumo, she'd tried to challenge me before. Of course, nothing really came to fruition due to our grade difference. After that, Kiryuuin left me alone, although she would talk to me from time to

time. And it didn't seem like she was trying to fight Nagumo either."

"She got bored of you two real fast."

"That was the ideal outcome for me. I don't have time for her nonsense."

He was Class 3-A's leader and the student council president at the time. Nagumo was already troublesome enough. Kiryuuin joining in would just add to the headache.

"And so? What did you want to tell me about Nagumo?"

"I think now is the time to discuss how the circumstances will change in the near future. I've adhered to this school's traditions because I believe in its system and rules. Nagumo wants to uproot those foundations. Most likely, an unprecedented number of students will be expelled next year."

"Those who don't have the abilities will fall, and those with talent will be forced to play. That's what you said before."

"That's right. And now that Nagumo is in power, it's only a matter of time before he acts on his ideals."

"Isn't it strange that his vision is the exact opposite of yours? As the former student council president, weren't you the one who brought him in?"

"I'm not going to deny that. Nagumo was the only one I believed had potential, but his ideologies differed from mine. I was the one responsible for training him as a successor, but I failed."

"To be honest, his idea doesn't sound that bad. Didn't this school promote the idea of meritocracy?"

"You could say that, but Nagumo's methods are akin to tyranny. While it could force more students to work harder, those who aren't gifted will have no ground to stand on. The main principle of this school that I wholeheartedly adhered to was its goal to nurture its students' abilities no matter who they are. The current system punishes those who have no desire to improve, but Nagumo's new regime won't even give them the chance to do that."

I get what he means. While Nagumo's ideas might sound good if you only care about the results, we're dealing with high school students here. If he alters the system in such a way, pandemonium will soon break out.

Fear and desperation, all for the sake of survival... If Nagumo gets to do what he wants, this school will probably start to resemble that place.

"I can see where you're coming from, but I don't really know what he's capable of."

A class leader and a student council president-- what does that amount to?

"He's managed to bring almost all of the other 2nd-year students to his side."

"All 2nd-year students? That's odd. I understand Nagumo controlling everyone in Class 2-A, but to the other classes, he'd be an enemy, right?"

"He's already won over the entire school."

I was playing dumb to get as much as possible out of him, but I'd already gotten wind of this information some time ago, thanks to Kikyuu and Hirata. Needless to say, it was pretty crazy.

"Two 1st-years applied for student council positions this year: Katsuragi Kouhei and Ichinose Honami. They're both talented students with a lot of promise, but I decided not to admit them."

"You were afraid that Nagumo would bring those two under his command."

"Exactly. With the escalating competition between the 3rd-years, I won't have the time to properly guide the two of them. I almost succeeded, but Nagumo worked behind my back to establish contact with Ichinose Honami, forcibly adding her to the student council."

I'd finally gotten some more context about why things happened the way they did.

"I know you want to fight Nagumo without drawing attention to yourself, so you can use Suzune like you've done in the sports festival."

"Hmm..." I took a sip from my tea. "If Nagumo kept his hands away from us, I wouldn't have accepted this absurd request. Frankly speaking, it's not my thing to get involved in stuff like this."

The older Horikita also paused to sip his tea.

"I also find it strange. If I'm being honest, I don't think you'd be in any trouble even if you completely ignore my request. I'm not ignorant enough to believe that I managed to solicit your cooperation by simply saying that Nagumo might destroy your solace." He narrowed his eyes and scrutinized me. "Your goal lies beyond that."

"You might be right, but I don't think that matters right now."

"Don't worry. I have no intention of prying." He crossed his arms and leaned back. "Now then, we'll move on to your end of the conversation. I didn't come here without expecting a proper concord. So, how can I repay you?"

"How generous," I replied. "Then I won't hesitate. There are two things that I need your cooperation with. Firstly, I made a deal with one of my classmates. Thanks to him, we were able to win the most decisive special exam during the first semester. I'd like to fulfill my end of the bargain."

Just based on those details, I'm sure he could already guess who this classmate is.

"You're talking about Kouenji Rokusuke," he said. "He'd been causing some trouble among the 3rd-year students."

"I know you're already aware of it, but he found a loophole in the system by taking advantage of his family's wealth. With that in mind, I want you to let him continue using this method. In fact, I want you to endorse him if possible."

"Are you serious?" The older Horikita cast a doubtful eye.

"Yes. I'm sure it'll be hard to convince the 3rd-years from other classes, so I don't mind if you just focus on your class."

"I'd like to agree, but if he can't provide a guarantee, then I won't be able to help. And of course, there's a very high chance that Nagumo would try to stop him. Kouenji's method is tantamount to stepping on authority."

"I see," I knew that much, but I'm not planning to close the deal right away. "For now, your willingness should be enough. Is it alright if I give your contact information to Kouenji?"

"That's fine," he nodded in agreement. "How about your other request?"

"For that, I'll contact you in the future once everything is ready."

He looked at me for a few seconds before sighing.

"Well, I don't see a problem. I doubt you'd involve me in something objectionable."

I doubt he'd consider his role to be "objectionable", so I guess we're fine.

"So, is that all?" asked the older Horikita.

"Yep, that's pretty much it."

The two of us stood up and made our way to the door.

"Forgive me for bothering you," he said.

"It's nothing. I'm imposing my requests on you as well."

My reply was met with a faint smile. Before he leaves, maybe I could ask him one more question.

"Traditions change, even the ones you staunchly uphold. That's just how the passage of time works, isn't it?"

"It's not about tradition, and it's not about change. It's about what I think is good. And as long as I'm in this school, I won't sit by and have those who work hard get robbed of their futures just because they are weak."

But at the end of the day, while your goal is to protect them, you still acknowledge them as weak. Is this what they call "noblesse oblige"? I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You're *her* brother, after all.

Horikita Manabu left my room without saying any more. I cleaned up the table where we drank our tea and sat on the bed. I noticed something move in the corner of my eye. When I turned my head to have a look, my eyes were drawn outside of the window.

"It's snowing..."

Author's Notes:

"雪だ..."

"Yuki da..."

Vol. 7: Chapter 7.2 - A Small Investment

The first snow of the season arrived last night on a Saturday. The snowfall wasn't heavy, and they melted at dawn, leaving puddles of water on the concrete. Despite the appearance of snow, today's temperature still clocked at around twenty-four degrees.

The Ayanokouji Group initially planned on going out for some karaoke today, but...

[Let's move it to some other time! I want to finish reading all of the remaining volumes before Christmas!]

Haruka wanted to binge the current series that she was reading. Apparently, it was a really good rom-com light novel that Ijuuin recommended.

[I don't think I'll be able to go tomorrow! Watari and Professor asked me to play some VR Games with them!]

And Ken had games to play, which had become a more common occurrence.

In the end, only Akito, Airi, and Keisei were available since I had an appointment as well.

As I waited in the resting area, my phone suddenly rang. The caller ID which displayed the name "Kikuchi Kyou" was requesting a video call.

"Oh, Kiyotaka!"

"What's up? Are you guys having fun?" I asked.

"We're having lots of fun! You should've seen Yukimura's face when he choked on the spicy takoyaki!"

"Shut up, Kikuchi!" I heard a yell in the background.

Akito's face suddenly showed up as he joined in on the conversation.

"Hey, Kiyotaka. Haruka said she'd be here later. You sure you're not gonna come by and join us?"

"Haruka? I thought she was busy."

"The FoMO got to her, I guess. Or maybe she's worried that Airi might get closer to Ichihashi-san and others than her," Akito smirked.

"That does sound like something Haruka would be worried about."

Mori was the one who planned this karaoke hangout. Apparently, she also invited Horikita, but she politely declined. Tsuki would've invited his friend group, but he probably took Airi into

consideration and decided against it.

Honestly, I think Airi can handle an energetic guy like Onizuka. Makida looks a bit unapproachable, but he's pretty chill too. And the same could be said for Minami (Hakuo) who has a grumpy resting face. All of them are nice guys that Airi probably wouldn't mind interacting with. Of course, that's just an opinion of mine.

"What about you, Kiyotaka? You'll miss out on some great karaoke moments, you know? Mori, Nishimura, and Azuma are all on fire. It feels like there's a battle concert. And they actually got Airi to sing a bunch of songs."

Ichihashi doesn't really like to sing as much as the other three, so I guess she's more on the cheering squad with the guys. Even I can see that they're all trying their hardest to open up Airi's heart, especially the girls.

"I'll be there if there's a chance."

"You gotta come here, Ayanokouji-kun! Ryuuko's singing her heart out! Ow!" Azuma cheerfully waved at me before getting smacked in the head by Mori and Ichihashi.

Before ending the call, Kikuchi gave the phone to Airi who wished me a good day. The genuine smile on her face was very nice to see. She really looked like she was having fun.

Tsuki, Ryuuko, Mori, Azuma, Ichihashi, Akito, Airi, and Keisei... That's eight people-- nine if I count Haruka who plans on joining them later. Two friend groups hanging out. I don't know if my social battery can handle that.

From what I can see, it seems like Airi isn't having that much of a hard time. Azuma and the others must've been keeping her comfortable. As fate would have it, those four girls became connected with Airi through her love for pictures. And now, they want to be friends with her.

With that being said, it's about time the other party turned up. I arrived a little earlier, but it's safe to assume *she'd* do the same.

"Good day to you, Ayanokouji-kun. Sorry, did you wait long?"

And just as I thought about her...

"I just got here. Don't worry about it."

"May I sit next to you?"

"I don't mind."

I sat near the edge of the bench so there was a lot of space. Sakayanagi sat on the opposite end without much issue.

"It's a pleasant day, isn't it? It's not as cold as I thought it would be."

"Yeah. But since it'll be Christmas in a few days, I'm sure the temperature would drop in an instant."

"Do you have your winter wear ready? I'd assume you'd go out

with your friends on winter break."

"You're right. I bought a bunch of new ones the other day. How about you?"

"I plan on relaxing inside my room for the most part, but I'd have to go out at some point. If it's a White Christmas, then I'd love to walk around and enjoy the snow."

Sakayanagi's words were met with silence. I kept my eyes on her for a few seconds before looking forward. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't want to meet her as well, but she was the one who called me here. I wonder what she wanted to talk about.

"Congratulations on taking your position as Class A," I said.

"I appreciate it, but such an achievement is nothing to be proud of. I didn't even get to accomplish my goal," she smiled.

"Well, sorry about that. I did say that I won't do a thing."

"You don't need to apologize. We both knew that it was the inevitable outcome," she giggled. "I got Ryuen-kun involved, after all. I don't think you would get in my way if he didn't bother you."

"That's right. I assume he got the message."

"He sure did, and he's making his move soon. His target... is Kushida-san, am I right?"

I nodded.

"So that's how he plans to lure you in-- using his strongest weapon. When I heard that Class D was asking around about Kushida-san, I knew that Ryuen-kun was up to something. I'd love to join in, but I'll focus on destroying the rest of your class for now."

"That would be for the best."

"I can hardly wait. I hope Horikita-san doesn't get too discouraged."

"I don't think she will. Horikita was narrow-minded, but she's starting to grow. Her growth will affect the entire class, and that will reveal who's worth keeping. Once the good seeds grow, our class should be able to stand against yours."

"If that's your honest evaluation, then I have no choice but to believe it... But how long will that take?"

"Who knows? It could take a year, or maybe more than that. They might not even grow at all."

"Fufufu. I thought you were confident about this so-called 'growth'."

"Nothing is certain," I said. "So it's also possible that they'll grow sooner than you think."

Sakayanagi's smile didn't fade. She closed her eyes and heaved a calm sigh.

"I'll take your word for it, Ayanokouji-kun. But I don't think Horikita-san can beat me anytime soon."

"I'm not doubting that. She's nowhere near your level as of now, and I don't think that'll change for a long time. But soon enough, she'll become a capable leader."

Horikita might not beat Sakayanagi as an individual, but the class they're fostering will surely change the tides at some point.

"Well, I'm not really interested in Horikita-san. Whether she grows or not hardly matters to me. I just have to take away 300 more points from your class and we can finally have our rematch."

"Are you even sure that I'll accept your request even if you throw us back down to Class D?"

"Of course," she nodded. "You were the one who proposed the conditions, and I know you have a grander purpose behind it."

Grander purpose, huh? I wouldn't call it that. I'm just trying to finish what I started-- seeing things through until the end. And for that, I needed the right field.

"And besides," Sakayanagi continued. "Accepting my challenge this way is the least troublesome method. It's very convenient for both of us, right?"

"I agree with you on that."

If I had to choose between a hostile declaration of war and a civilized declaration of war, then I'd go for the latter five times out of five.

The wind blew past our skins. Even with the sun out, the air had become noticeably cooler. Silence ensued once again. This time, I decided to ask what her intentions were.

"So? Why did you call me here?"

"Well, I've been curious about a couple of things," replied Sakayanagi. "Firstly, Kushida-san was targeted by Ryuen-kun because he thinks she matters to you. However, that's something I highly doubt to be true. Am I wrong?"

"Can I ask why you want to know? I doubt the answer would be of any use to you."

Hearing this, Sakayanagi slowly shook her head.

"I don't intend on using your answer for anything. It's nothing but genuine curiosity. Of course, I came here knowing that I'd have to give something in exchange. If you have any questions, then please feel free to ask me in return."

"If that's the case, then I don't mind answering," I shrugged. "You probably know that Kikyou has been my closest friend ever since I entered this school. Obviously, she matters to me. Isn't it strange to think otherwise?"

"Fufufu~. That's not funny even as a joke, Ayanokouji-kun. I don't think *anyone* in this world matters to someone like you. I'm not that ignorant."

"Even if you say that, it's true that Kiky matters a lot to me," I doubled down.

Sakayanagi gave me a meaningful look as her smile returned.

"I see. I understand." She seemed satisfied, so I won't question whatever conclusion she came up with. "Now then, I'm curious about your decision during the sports festival. Why did you decide to compete with Horikita Manabu and Nagumo Miyabi?"

"Horikita was injured, but she wanted to show her resolve to her older brother. That's why I pitched in as her proxy. As for Nagumo Miyabi... I think he wanted to compete with Horikita's older brother too. It wasn't my intention to get involved with him."

"Is that so...? That's odd. Ever since you stepped down, I'd always assumed that you'd try to be as lowkey as possible to avoid the upper years' eyes."

"Avoid? Why would I need to do that?"

Sakayanagi chuckled in response to my question.

"I heard that he's up to something big. Us first years will be affected to some degree, so I don't think it's a good idea to draw his attention towards yourself."

"It's not that big of a deal. Horikita is a lot more high profile than me, and Nagumo heard my conversation with Horikita Manabu about being his sister's substitute."

"Hmm, I guess that's reasonable. You've certainly put your name out there after pulling a stunt like that, but at least you kept the risk at a minimum."

"So? Did my answers satisfy you?"

"They sure did. Thank you for indulging me," she nodded. "Well then, it's time for me to return the favor. Please ask away."

"No need," I shook my head in response. "I don't really have any questions to ask. It's a chance to gain some information about the enemy, but I'm fine with letting it go. As I said, I'm just a regular member of the class now. I don't care about gaining any advantage whatsoever. And even if that's not my goal, I'm not interested in your class enough to ask out of pure curiosity-- at least not right now."

"I see. So you let our conversation continue because you may have some questions in the future instead."

"You could say that."

"Fufufu~. Crafty as expected, Ayanokouji-kun." Sakayanagi stood up and checked her phone. "That's all I have for you today. Since it's already past noon, I'm sure Masumi-san is already waiting at our meeting place. The two of us planned on having lunch together, you see."

"Then, have a nice day." I also got up on my feet and prepared to

leave.

"Yes, you too. Talking with you was very delightful. I hope we can meet like this again in the future."

"As long as I'm free, I don't see why not."

And with that, Sakayanagi and I walked off in opposite directions. With how things should go in the next few days, there's no harm in creating a few more cards for myself.

Author's Notes:

Merry Christmas, everyone!

Please leave a lot of comments about the chapter!

Thank you for reading as always!

SS.29 - Kushida Kikyou: For My Own Sake

December 18th, Saturday.

"Now then, welcome everyone! This should be our second sleepover as a group, right?" I asked with a smile.

"Yes! I had lots of fun last time. I'm really looking forward to this, Kikyou-chan!" said Mii-chan.

We talked a lot back then. I totally pushed myself to the brink even though I wanted to sleep already. But... to be fair, I had a lot of fun too.

"It would've been great if Kayoko-chan and Kayano-chan were here," Kokoro-chan said with a melancholic expression.

Kayoko-chan likes to hang out with Karuizawa-san's group nowadays, and Kayano-chan has been getting along really well with Yokoyama-san's group lately. They still hang out with us from time to time though.

"Now, now. It can't be helped if they're not available. And besides, the purpose of this sleepover is to cheer Ryuuko-chan up!" I gestured my hands like a host presenting a guest. Just as I did, Ryuuko-chan came out of the bathroom.

"Geez, you're exaggerating, Kikyou," she pouted while wiping her wet hair.

"Eh...? Did something happen, Ryuuko-san?"

"Are you okay?"

Our adorable friends suddenly looked concerned. Ryuuko-chan has been a very kind and reliable big sister to them... and to be honest, to me too.

"I'm okay. Thanks for worrying," she answered with a gentle smile. "It's nothing big, really. I already told Kikyou about it, and I wanted to tell you two as well. So I thought; *"Why not during a sleepover?"*, right?"

"So... What happened?"

The two of them intently listened in anticipation.

"Well... I confessed my feelings to Kiyotaka-kun."

"Ehhh!"

"Kyah~!"

"C-Calm down. Kikyou said you'd have to cheer me up, right? That obviously meant I got rejected," she explained.

"O-Oh, sorry, Ryuuko-san..."

"There's nothing to apologize to, Kokoro. Now we're on the same boat," Ryuuko-chan winked as if to lighten the mood, reassuring Kokoro-chan.

"You're so brave, Ryuuko-chan. I feel like I can confess my feelings too!" said Mii-chan. "But if Ayanokouji-kun rejects even you, I'm sure I'll get rejected too..."

"Ahaha, I'm not really sure what it is, but it's probably because Kiyotaka-kun doesn't want to be in a relationship right now." Ryuuko-chan poked her chin as she pondered. "That, or maybe he already likes someone."

The three of them suddenly turned to me.

"W-What...?" I asked in a panic.

"If there's any girl that Kiyotaka-kun would want to date, it could only be you, Kikyoun."

"I agree. I'm jealous, but at the same time, Kikyoun-chan and Ayanokouji-kun feel like they're meant for each other," said Mii-chan. "And I feel like Kikyoun-chan won't get rejected if she confesses."

"Confess? There's nothing to confess!" I replied with a slightly raised voice. They can interpret my flustered expression however they want, but I needed to react like this to keep the conversation going.

"I don't tend to assume other people's feelings, but as your close friend, I think you really like Kiyotaka-kun."

"I mean... I do like him, but... I'm not sure if it's romantic."

This is very tricky-- mixing lies with truth.

"You're really not sure? Everyone can see how differently you act around him. Isn't that the main reason why a lot of people thought you two were dating?"

Hitting me right where it hurts, huh?

"I guess so... To be honest, this is the first time I've been so close with a boy. Back then, most boys just wanted to get close to me because they had ulterior motives."

Well, that's just how boys are, after all, especially during middle school. I'm not complaining though. I really enjoyed the love and affection they gave me.

"So you just don't know how close you should be with him?"

"Kind of? It's more like my guard is down when I'm with Ayanokouji-kun-" Ah, crap.

"Ohoho, that's interesting. So your guard is up when you're with others?" As expected, Ryuuko-chan wouldn't let that statement go undiscussed.

"I-Isn't that obvious? I'm not that simple, Ryuuko-chan! Of course, I'm thinking about a lot of things. It's not like I wear my heart on

my sleeves," I pouted. Luckily, it's easy to avoid a crisis.

"I know, I know. I'm just kidding," she chuckled.

This is usually the part where I'd curse her out, but there's no reason for that to happen. Whenever someone *"teases"* me, it's to make themselves feel superior. Because of my reputation and influence during elementary school and middle school, a lot of the *popular* girls who got close to me tried to make themselves seem like they were above me using words to knock me down under the guise of *"friendly banter"*. Those bitches aren't my friends.

Ryuuko-chan is different. When she teases us, that's all there is to it.

"Kikyou, you're making a weird face again."

"E-Eh? Am I...?"

"Ehehe, Kikyou-chan has been making a lot of faces lately," Kokoro-chan commented.

"Really? I don't think I am though..."

"Your face starts to wrinkle whenever we talk about Nagaoka-kun."

Does it? I mean, to be fair, that guy is disgusting.

"Ah, you're doing it again!"

"I can't help it! There's no way I can just smile after hearing that guy's name!"

"Yeah... Did something happen with him though? He's been looking at you again these past few days," Kokoro-chan asked, looking concerned.

"I don't know..." I shook my head.

"Maybe it's because of Ryuuken-kun? He started asking around about you, didn't he?"

"Hnnng, enough about them! Let's not ruin this night, okay?" I exclaimed.

"Ahaha, Kikyou-chan is getting worked up. It's very refreshing. I like seeing more sides of you," Mii-chan added.

Urgh, dang it! My mask tends to slip more and more when I'm around these three! Am I getting too comfortable with them?

What will I do if I accidentally blurt out weird stuff in the future...?

Geez, this is all your fault, Kiyotaka-kun!

"E-Enough about me! We were talking about Ryuuko-chan's confession, right?"

"That's already in the past. Right now, isn't it Mii-chan's turn?" Ryuuko-chan smirked.

"M-Me?!"

"Oh my. Do you plan on waiting things out until there's a high chance that Ayanokouji-kun would say yes? How clever, Mii-chan."

I teased.

Mii-chan got increasingly red.

"I don't think that's the case. If anything, you probably want to confess as soon as possible. Right, Mii-chan?" Kokoro-chan asked.

The flustered Mii-chan meekly nodded.

"I... After everything that's happened, I think I can accept just being friends with Ayanokouji-kun. But... I don't want to regret things by hiding my feelings forever." Her upturned eyes turned to Ryuuko-chan. "That's how it was for you, wasn't it?"

Ryuuko-chan smiled warmly.

"Yes, you're right. I confessed for my own sake. I wanted to let go of these feelings and stay friends with him."

"Yes, yes, exactly! I... I want to do that too. I'm sure it'll hurt, but it's enough as long as I manage to convey my feelings..." Mii-chan clenched her fist. "Alright, I've decided! I'll confess my feelings to Ayanokouji-kun right before winter break!"

"Wow! That's wonderful, Mii-chan. But are you sure? It'll hurt *a lot*, you know? I cried really hard when I got rejected," Kokoro-chan giggled.

"For real. I cried all night after I confessed to Ayanokouji-kun," Ryuuko-chan shrugged.

"E-Even Ryuuko-chan cried...?"

You know you're an easy target if even the gentle Kokoro-chan manages to tease you.

"You'll be fine, Mii-chan. I'm sure you'll get through it!" I cheered.

"Kikyou-chan!" she cried for a hug.

Geez, these girls are a handful. I can't help but want to look after them. I already have a full plate with Ryuen-kun, you know?

But... I see. Confessing for my own sake, huh...?

Vol. 7: Chapter 8.1 - Time to Settle Things

It was soon after starting elementary school that I realized I was abnormal. I found a large snake on a class field trip. Some students watched with great interest from a safe distance. Some were scared, some couldn't care less, and some wanted the snake to go away. Most, however, wanted the snake to die. Even the adults panicked, crying out for someone to help.

So, I grabbed a big rock and bashed the snake's head in. I might have gotten bit, but I wasn't afraid of that.

My classmates screamed, and the teachers were in a panic. I wasn't trying to be a hero by destroying the snake everyone feared. I wasn't trying to impress everyone. I didn't care about any of that. I just didn't see the need to be afraid of it.

I learned something about myself that day.

Fear and pleasure are two sides of the same coin to me. And when my enemy starts to fear me, I feel unimaginable amounts of pleasure. The moment an enemy succumbs, a huge rush of adrenaline courses through my entire body.

Violence rules the world, and the effectiveness of your particular brand of violence determines what you accomplish. The snake's death was my first unshakeable victory, and the sight of its flattened corpse gave me such pleasure. The violence I'd used was simple and effective. Well, you could argue that violence itself is simple and effective. And that's exactly why it's become my main weapon.

The fact remains, however, that people are hostile towards those they sense are different from them. And because I was never afraid, I never saw the need to respect anyone. That's why I've had many enemies since that day, both internal and external.

Even so, I didn't falter once no matter how strong my enemies were. If someone bested me, all I thought about was how to get revenge and turn the tables on them. Even if I lose a battle, it doesn't matter as long I win the war. Eventually, they would all bow to me. Those who possess an unparalleled capacity for violence are truly the elite. There was just one problem, and it grew as I did. It became increasingly difficult for me to feel that same pleasure.

I was bored-- bored that no one could fulfill my dearest wish to be overthrown.

Perhaps I'd only meet my match in death.

December 22nd, Wednesday.

"This brings us to the end of homeroom," said Sakagami-sensei. "I'd like to remind everyone to please be on your best behavior, even during winter vacation, and make good use of your time. That's all."

I took out my phone as I listened to his corporate and scripted rambling. Today was the day of the closing ceremony-- the final day of the second semester. Our class finished early, leaving us free by the afternoon. There were no club activities either. The school encouraged students to head back early, so hardly anyone would be left in the building.

In other words, it was finally time to strike.

"I've gotten hold of the necessary information to lure Kikyou out, and I'll use Kikyou to lure Ayanokouji out," I muttered to myself while glancing at the others. "And it seems like everyone else is ready to take on their role."

I suddenly felt excited. It was about time I settled my score with Ayanokouji. Time and time again, he would shamelessly interrupt my plans. This time, there will be no way out for him.

During the Paper Shuffle, I'd managed to expel one of their students while putting pressure on him. Because Ayanokouji was repeatedly framed as a traitor, even if his reputation didn't fall, seeds of doubt would still be planted. And so far, tailing the four leaders did wonders in making Kikyou's mental drop. I started asking around about her which made her feel isolated and targeted. The final nail in the coffin would be the picture I'd sent to her.

Seriously, she did something amusing during her middle school days. That's not something you'd expect from Class A's angel. Now, she'd have no choice but to follow my instructions if she didn't want the truth to be revealed.

I subtly glanced around and saw how nervous the others were. Well, that's obvious. We're about to do something big, after all.

"Kukuku..."

Both of them should know what's going to happen next. There's no way Kikyou wouldn't ask Ayanokouji for help, and even if she didn't, I can just order her to do so.

"Ryuuen-kun," called Hiyori, who sat right beside me.

"What?" I asked.

"Everyone seems really restless today, aren't they? What are you planning?"

"I'm about to exact revenge on the person who'd been entertaining me for the past several months. You wanna come?"

"No, I must decline. I don't quite see how that would be fun," she paused. "Do you really need to hunt him down?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing. I suppose that's for you to decide as our class's leader." She stood. "I'll be in the library. If there's any trouble, please contact me."

"It's not like you'll be of any use though, ain't you?"

"I suppose you're right. Well, have a nice winter vacation."

She calmly replied without a trace of fear before finally leaving. Hiyori was clever, but hated conflict, which made her useless as a pawn. People who obediently followed me around were much easier to use.

That said, she seemed to be on good terms with Ayanokouji. I know that Hiyori wouldn't easily betray the class, but I guess not telling her anything was the right choice.

I finished my final preparations and then gathered my people.

"It's finally time, isn't it, Ryuen-san?" said Ishizaki who looked uptight while holding a paper bag.

"Let's make the most of today," I replied.

There's me, Ishizaki, Albert, Ibuki, and a few others. If I wanted to be stealthy, bringing this many people would've been a no-go. However, it's not something that a strategic assembly couldn't fix. If we carefully time our arrival at that place, then it's hard to see why people would take notice.

Thirty minutes after homeroom ended, winter vacation had begun. The campus was practically deserted. As with summer vacation, the students stampeded back to their dorms, leaving barely anyone to witness our bold movements.

"So, where are we going? Cut the crap and tell us," said Ibuki.

I'd said nothing of my current strategy to anyone apart from those involved during the preparatory process. There's nothing wrong with trying to be as careful as possible, especially if it's against someone who'd beaten me before.

A few of the guys went first, pretending to be as casual as they could. I didn't really care about how bad their acting was as long as they reached the place without any commotion.

Ishizaki stayed quiet since he probably expected me to explain everything myself.

"There are a lot of nice locations in this city-like campus. Even if the school's surveillance is top-notch, it doesn't cover every nook and cranny. One place I'd thought about using was the dead-end near the dormitories. There are no cameras and it's not a place where guards would patrol at this time of the day. However, it'll be

easy for someone to come if anyone screams as loud as they could in such an open place."

"The other one would be the place behind Gymnasium #2. It's a spacious and quiet place, but the risk is still higher in comparison to other places. Even if there are no club activities today, some seniors are still gonna be loitering around that place."

"So... where will we go?" she asked.

I smirked while pointing directly upwards.

"Are you serious...?"

"Kukuku, dead serious. I've already made the necessary preparations. In a few minutes, we'll have to be on our way as well."

Of course, those few minutes didn't take long to pass.

After climbing the stairs, I promptly opened the door. It was rare for a school rooftop to be accessible all year round. However, this one had both proper fencing and a surveillance camera. Any dangerous activities would be recorded. Students knew this, which was why they behaved themselves up here.

It was open until around 6 PM when all students are expected to have left the school. It's possible that the rooftop would be closed off earlier today, but that's not a problem.

The roof was a secluded place. With its cafes and mall, the campus had more popular hangout spots, especially today. I was probably the only one eccentric enough to come all the way up here very often.

"Ryuuen, isn't this place bad?" glared Ibuki.

She pointed at the only drawback that this place had: the surveillance camera.

"Don't be so nervous," I replied.

There was a limit to the number of cameras the school could install. There was only one surveillance camera on this particular roof, positioned above the door, which was the only real place a camera could be installed. Fortunately for the school, this one camera was more than enough to capture nearly the entire rooftop in its field of view, leaving almost no blind spots. However, if that one camera stopped functioning, the rooftop would be completely unmonitored.

When we tried to frame Yamauchi, we took advantage of this particular camera. Now, I'll be taking advantage of it again.

I stared at the camera which was directly above me right now. It was the same kind of camera as the ones in the school building: vandalism-proof with a strong polycarbonate lens and tough steel body that wouldn't be easy to break. However, I never intended on using violence to disable this one.

"There. Safe from prying eyes," I said as I sprayed the black spray

paint I'd brought with me.

I'd done my research. Of the hundreds of cameras installed throughout the school, only a limited number displayed footage in real-time, and this one wasn't one of them. If anything happened here, the school authorities wouldn't notice it immediately. I'd painted a different surveillance camera before to test my theory, and my only punishment when I reported what I'd done to Sakagami-sensei was paying to have it cleaned.

"I see. But isn't that a punishable offense?"

"Just a simple prank. Nothing to get worked up over."

"We'd better hope this all goes according to whatever your plan is," she said.

Ibuki noticed something strange as I tossed the paper bag containing the spray paint back to Ishizaki.

"Hey, Ryuuken... There are only three of us here. Where's Albert and the other guys? I thought they went first?"

"Oh, did you think this place is where everything's gonna go down?" I sneered. "I only came here to create a small alibi. Even though the school is on low alert, the teachers haven't left the building yet. Since there's a lot of us, do you think using the rooftop is a viable option?"

"Well, not really. Tsk, I should've guessed from a mile away. Damn it, this is so frustrating! What are you planning anyway?"

"I'll tell you when we get there. I don't wanna waste my time explaining shit right now."

"Fine, I'll wait." Ibuki crossed her arms.

"Now then, let's get the hell out of here, shall we?"

If I wanted to do this, there's a certain place that fits the bill.

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"This place is shady," muttered Ibuki.

"But that's because it is," I replied.

A lot of students were probably enjoying themselves at Keyaki Mall, and those smart enough to know that immediately went home to rest. This is the last place someone could possibly wander into right at the beginning of winter break.

Among the other inconspicuous corners of ANHS would be the storage area where a bunch of warehouses are huddled near each other. It's a place that only the people working for the school would typically go to, but Sakayanagi and I used this place to hold a couple of meetings before. (1)

The route on the way here isn't as suspicious as one would expect. You'd raise a bunch of eyebrows if you kept going straight after exiting the school entrance, but if you make your way to Keyaki Mall first, then it becomes really easy. Everyone's attention wouldn't be as sharp and a lot of students are scattered around that area, so taking a casual detour isn't a problem. That's especially true today when all the students can think about is how they're gonna spend their first afternoon right after the break starts.

"So? Can you explain why we're here now?"

"Even if you don't know exactly what we're gonna do, you could probably already guess that our targets are Kikyuu and Ayanokouji."

"You're gonna call them here?" Ibuki looked skeptical, but she understood after a brief moment. "You were asking around about Kushida, right? If you managed to find something about her, then she'd most likely show up... And you're gonna use her to make Ayanokouji come here."

"Simple, right? Kikyuu will definitely make her way here. This is a matter of life and death for her."

"What do you mean? You were actually telling the truth when you said she was fake?"

"Of course, I was. There's no way a perfect angel like her could exist in this world. She's bound to be rotten inside, and I have the power to expose that today. Why? Did you get fooled by her goody-two-shoes act?"

Even I'd be hard-pressed to believe that Ichinose wasn't hiding something from everyone. We're all ugly inside. And since hiding

that ugliness is a pain, I never bothered.

"I wasn't fooled!"

It was obvious just by looking at her face. Kikyou must've taken care of her during the Deserted Island Exam.

"We're here," I said. "Ishizaki, open it up."

"We're going inside one of these?"

"That's right. This is where the fun will happen."

As we reached the designated warehouse, Ishizaki pulled the metallic shutters open without any hesitation. Inside were Albert and the other guys who wanted to join in.

"Ryuuen-san, you're here," said Kondou.

"Just sit there and relax. I've called our guest and she's on her way."

"This place..."

It didn't have any lights on, but the small windows near the roof took in enough sunlight to brighten up the place.

"That's right, Ibuki. There would be no escape for Kikyou or Ayanokouji, and no help would come for them either... And these--*these* are the real reason why this was the right place to settle everything."

"Weapons," she muttered.

Ibuki observed the clump of varied blunt objects on one side of the warehouse.

"Going in here isn't allowed, right? How in the world did you even get permission for this?" she asked.

"Isn't that obvious? There's hardly anything in this school that can't be purchased by private points."

Ibuki quickly understood. She'd seen me use private points for all sorts of things. This one shouldn't be much of a surprise.

"I told them that I would like to rent this place for a week or two because I wanted to throw a *surprise Christmas party*," I smiled.

"So you bribed them. There's no way they'd turn a blind eye to this. You were stacking up these weapons for quite some time, right? They should've known about your plan!"

"I didn't make an effort to keep it a secret from them in the first place. I was testing out whether or not I'd get reprimanded or confronted. The fact that we're here can only mean one thing. With the use of private points, even sweeping a violent incident under the rug can be done at a price."

"You're insane..."

"I get that a lot," I replied before turning my head.

It seems like some dimwits are having an argument. Their voices got louder as I approached.

"Hey, what's all the fun about? Mind sharing?"

"Ah, Ryuuen-san. Nagaoka keeps on asking questions. He's doubting whether Kushida-chan will even come here."

"N-No, it's not like I'm doubting you, Ryuuen. I'm just trying to make sure, you know? If Kikyou-chan doesn't come, we can't lure Ayanokouji here, right?"

"Of course, of course. You're right, Nagaoka."

He heaved a sigh of relief before I grabbed his neck.

"-aghk?!"

Everyone stiffened and their faces tightened up, but no one tried to help him.

"And what did I say earlier? Did you hear it?"

"S-Sh... o... er way..."

"Speak more clearly. Stop overreacting, you moron."

"She's... o-on her way... h-here!" he answered with a yell.

Nagaoka dropped to his knees and panted for air after I let go.

"So you did hear what I said. It's good that we're clear. Now you know how unnecessary your question is, right, Nagaoka?" I turned around with a scoff.

Nagaoka is a very useful pawn. He's a detestable bastard who thinks he's hot shit, but that's exactly why I can use him. He's an idiot of a different caliber. Unlike Ishizaki, he probably hates me to the core, but he can't show it because I'm more powerful than him. Even with me sitting on the throne, Nagaoka still thinks he's better than me, or anyone for that matter. He's a hyena-- the type to bite the hands that fed him.

And it's not just him.

I grabbed one of the weapons and tossed it in front of him.

"You're a member of the baseball club, right? Use that well or I might use it on you myself."

Well, whether he respects me or not doesn't matter as long as he fears me.

November 5th, Friday.

"Good work today, Sakagami-sensei."

"Yes, good work today as well, Chabashira-sensei." Sakagami-sensei looked at me and nodded. "Ryuuen, Chabashira-sensei should be able to provide the information you want."

"Thanks a bunch, Sensei." My language was informal, but he should be used to it by now.

Sakagami-sensei made his way to his desk and started working.

"Did you need something, Ryuuen?" Chabashira-sensei asked.

"I do need something, actually. It's about one of your students."

Her eyes instantly turned vigilant.

"What do you mean? Did anyone of my students cause trouble for you...? Or maybe not. Sakagami-sensei mentioned that you needed information."

"Around three weeks ago, our class started asking around about Kikyuu. But we didn't really get anything good so far. That's why I'm here. As her homeroom teacher, you should know a little bit more about her than ordinary students."

Well, I did plan on asking a teacher for information right from the start, but rushing it wouldn't be ideal. I already knew that the information I needed existed, so focusing on the other aspects of my plan would be a lot more efficient.

"You're wasting your time. My students had been in many troubles after getting entangled with your schemes. Why would I willingly give you information about Kushida and make her even more vulnerable?"

Acting like a protective teacher, eh?

"Don't be like that, Sensei." I took out my phone and started navigating it. "I know I can get that information for the right price. I wonder if you're able to refuse."

Chabashira-sensei's eyes narrowed.

Kuku, I knew it. Teachers are unable to lie or refuse a student's request for a purchase. After a brief moment, she sighed in defeat.

"Fine. I can't deny that your request is valid. As long as you have enough points to pay, then I don't mind giving you some information."

These teachers are all the same. They talk as if they're doing us a favor, but I'm sure they're obliged to entertain any valid request without any exception-- as long as a condition is set. After numerous tests, I've come to learn a lot.

Well, well, well. I'm excited to know about the details of this system more than ever now.

"Can I buy your silence as well?" I asked after paying the necessary amount.

"Unfortunately, you can't."

"Oho? Then... I demand an explanation."

Chabashira-sensei's expression didn't change, but she probably felt irritated. Teachers can easily make up an excuse and lie to a student, but if the student was suspicious of this, they can always ask another teacher for confirmation. Regardless of morality, there's always a higher chance for the other teacher to snitch on the higher-ups since they are in competition with each other. In other

words, they *cannot* lie.

Chabashira-sensei can easily deceive me by saying that it's not in her authority to explain anything, but Sakagami-sensei was just a dozen paces away from us. I can simply approach him and fact-check Chabashira-sensei's words. If she lied, then she'd be in trouble.

"If two students have contradicting requests for a single teacher, then the teacher must honor the first student who made the request," she said.

She meticulously prevented herself from saying anything specific, but it didn't really matter.

"So another student had already solicited your cooperation, huh? It's a shame, but I guess I shouldn't complain too much. I was just beaten to the punch."

It didn't matter who this student was. Since I couldn't buy her silence, Chabashira-sensei could tell *anyone* about this. There's a high chance that she'd tattle to either Kikyou or Ayanokouji, but it's honestly a small price to pay in exchange for the information I want. In fact, it could even worsen Kikyou's mental state.

In any case, I was right on the mark. If I asked for the information early on, then I would've prematurely alerted my enemies.

"What did you want to know?" she asked.

"As Kikyou's teacher, did you know if she was hiding any secrets?"

"I'm sorry to say, but I don't. What I can only tell you are facts based on data."

"Alright, that's fine." I shrugged. "Well then, if we're talking about data, you should know about Kikyou's previous schools. I want to know their names?"

"But why...?"

"I believe that doesn't concern you. That information is as good as sold. All that's left is for you to give me what I bought."

Chabashira-sensei glared after hearing my disrespectful words.

"Kushida attended Tanashi Elementary School and Sakuragaoka Junior High School," she answered.

"How did she do in those schools?"

"She did relatively well. Her performance isn't that much different from when she was a child apart from a noticeable overall improvement. She's an excellently above-average and competent student."

"Well, isn't that nice?" I smirked. "So then... why was Kikyou put in Class D? Did something happen perhaps?"

"I don't know the details, but maybe something *did* happen. As a

normal teacher, that's the extent of what I know. If you want more details, you can do your own research with the information I gave you."

That question didn't seem to faze Chabashira-sensei. Maybe she really didn't know the full details.

"Kukuku, will do."

Other than that, she cleverly dodged the true essence of my question. It would've been nice to know more about the real sorting mechanics for each class, but I guess that'll have to wait for another time.

"Was that enough or do you still have more questions?"

She crossed her arms and waited. I can only respond with a wide smile.

"Where the hell did Ayanokouji come from?"

For the first time since I came here, Chabashira-sensei's calm demeanor fluctuated ever so slightly.

"Unfortunately for you, it's not in my authority to say anything about that," she replied, trying to regain her cool.

Hehh... She definitely knows something about him. Interesting... Very interesting.

"Oh, is that so? Well, that's okay. I'm satisfied for now. This should be worth the price. Thanks a bunch, Sensei."

Without waiting for a reply, I turned around and exited the teachers' faculty. I felt Chabashira-sensei's piercing gaze until I closed the door.

Later that evening, I hopped on my computer. All I needed was the name of Kikyuu's previous school. Even if I knew about her true nature, I couldn't use it unless I exposed her in front of everyone. However... her past is a different thing. Once I get to know what that is, it's all but over for her.

With that in mind, I diligently combed through every archived news article published last year on the school's website. Thankfully, the news page was easy to navigate. When it came to school controversies and issues, no specific names were written for obvious reasons.

However...

"Kukuku... Jackpot."

Author's Notes:

1. *It's the same place Sakayanagi had used in **Volume 5: Chapter 18.2 - Behind the Leak.***

Vol. 7: Chapter 9.1 - Confrontation

(13:28) [Come to the warehouses near Keyaki Mall. Be there by 2 PM.]

The moment I received that message, I knew my fate was sealed. It didn't matter if it was a dummy account. The identity of the sender was obvious.

What could he possibly want from me? Cooperation? Does he need information? On someone from the class? On Kiyotaka-kun? Well, there's no point in thinking about it anymore. It's almost a guarantee that he knew about my past as well.

I was currently with my friends at Keyaki Mall, but I guess I need to leave early on. It was all too easy for me to make up an excuse that they'd believe. Honestly, having a nice reputation was convenient.

But, well... There was a chance that maybe... after today, I'd lose all my friends.

All the things I've built up until this point... might disappear tomorrow.

"Should I call for his help?" I muttered to myself.

Kiyotaka-kun said that he'd protect me, but when I did become so weak that I needed someone else's protection? Kushida Kikyou wasn't that pathetic.

No, that's just my pride talking. From the start, I knew that I wasn't invincible. My previous schools may have been filled with naive people who were easy to deceive, but the world is a large place.

Ahh, what a shame. Just when I thought everything would start to change...

"Alright, I'll deal with this myself." I thought as I walked out of Keyaki Mall.

I reached the place after a few minutes and saw Yamada-kun waiting in front of one of the warehouses. He let me approach him and pulled the shutter open, escorting me inside.

"Welcome, Kikyou. The guys are pleased to see you."

Ryuuen was there along with... nine, ten... no-- eleven other Class

D boys if I count in Yamada-kun. After seeing Ibuki-san, that's a total of thirteen Class D students.

"Um, w-what did you want, Ryuuen-kun...?"

Did he plan on exposing me to all these people...? I shuddered as I looked at them but kept up the act.

I don't know if Ryuuen had told them about my true nature, but I won't take any chances. And based on the flustered reactions of some of them after seeing me, it seems like I made the right move.

That's it. Don't panic. What would Kiyotaka-kun do in a situation like this?

"What I want is simple. Just call Ayanokouji out here." Ryuuen shrugged as if the answer was obvious.

He smiled as if to mock me since he knew I was just wearing a mask.

So he called me here to bait out Kiyotaka-kun? I guess that's obvious after looking at them. They wanted to settle things with him using violence.

"I know you're enemies, but there's no need to do this!" I exclaimed, looking panicked. "If I call him here, you're obviously going to fight! And with those weapons... What are you going to do? Beat Kiyotaka-kun to death?"

I may be acting, but my worry was genuine. It's a fact that there are a dozen guys here with weapons ranging from two-by-two-inch wooden rods to baseball bats and metal bars. Coming here would be a death sentence.

"Why would you suggest that? We just wanna talk to him. Oh, and of course, you have to watch us *talk*."

"N-No!"

"C'mon, Kikyou. Our class lost a lot because of Ayanokouji ever since the start of school. Our class should've been above you, but we had to make do with being labeled as the defective class because of him. It's about time we release some of our pent-up frustrations, no?"

Of course... To them, Ryuuen's words weren't totally just for show. We basically stole their position without a heads-up.

And not only that. Among these Class D boys that Ryuuen brought, two of them were guys that I had rejected before. I'm sure they'd be more than happy to inflict pain on Kiyotaka-kun.

"No, I don't want to! I don't want my friend to be hurt!"

After riling myself up, I can feel some tears start to form. Good. I needed to act like a suffering damsel to elicit some sympathy from those who still believed in me.

"Alright, fine, fine. Don't cry now." Ryuuen's sinister smile widened. "We'll stop asking for Ayanokouji. But in exchange, *you*

will have to receive our frustrations in his place. You can probably satisfy us in many ways, right?"

"What...? What are you...?"

At that moment, a rush of questions came into my head. Is he joking? Are the others in on it? Can I escape?

"You know *exactly* what I mean."

I checked each and every one of their reactions. Ibuki-san looked disgusted but didn't say anything.

"R-Ryuuen-san... Are you serious about this?" Ishizaki-kun asked with a troubled face.

Most of them looked surprised, too. But I'll certainly remember those who looked thrilled about it.

"Don't get it wrong, Kikyuu. My whims are my whims. If you guys don't have the balls to do anything, then just stay there and watch." Ryuuen nonchalantly approached me.

I stepped back on reflex, feeling the danger. He pulled his hand from his pocket and tossed his phone at me.

"Here. Message Ayanokouji to come here alone. Don't even think about getting sneaky with me. Albert and I will watch your every move."

The moment I try something funny, I'm sure they wouldn't hesitate to restrain me from behind.

As thought about what I could do, he leaned in next to my ear.

"Make sure he doesn't bring anyone else here, or everyone in this school will know about your past. I'm sure everyone would like to know the kind of things Kushida Kikyuu did during middle school."

I started trembling. I knew it. He knew everything. How do you know? How do you know everything?!

"F-Fine... I get it! Just, please get away from me."

My breathing became ragged and it was getting very hard to keep my act up.

"No can do. I'll read the message as you type it. Albert isn't that good in Japanese, so it'll be bad if you start using difficult kanji."

I... I have no choice but to contact Kiyotaka-kun here.

(14:09) [Kiyotaka-kun, this is Kikyuu. Please come to the storage area near Keyaki Mall alone. Don't bring anyone or Ryuuen-kun will spread rumors about me. Please hurry.]

There's no telling if this message will become public or not, so it's better to say "rumors" rather than "secrets".

"You're such a careful girl, but I like that."

Of course, this guy also knew what I was thinking.

Still, I wonder if Kiyotaka-kun is still with Mii-chan. Would he come here, if they were still in the middle of something?

Yamada-kun walked out of the warehouse to wait for him.

"Is that enough?" I asked angrily while still being in character.

"It's perfect. I'm sure Ayanokouji will come running for you after receiving that message." Ryuen faced his classmates with a wide smile. "Alright, everyone. We'll wait for a few minutes until Ayanokouji comes here. In the meantime, why don't we have a chat with Kikyou over here?"

"I don't want to talk to any of you."

At this point, I figured that it would be strange for even my fake self to not be upset. But honestly, I don't think I can keep my act up for much longer... I can feel my legs slowly weakening, and my mind is starting to become hazy.

"I'll start, okay?" He continued to speak as if he didn't hear anything. "Do you have a boyfriend right now?"

"What...?"

"C'mon, you clearly heard my question. I'm asking if you have a boyfriend right now."

I would've ignored him, but staying silent might not be the best response.

"No, I don't."

"Then, did you have a boyfriend in the past? For example, during your middle school days?"

What...? What's with these questions? Is he trying to get something out of me? If he wanted to torment me, wouldn't he have gone for things related to that incident?

Is something else going on here...?

"I didn't... have a boyfriend in middle school," I replied with a slightly shaky voice.

"Oh? Are you sure?" Ryuen smirked.

"Ryuen-san, do you think Kushida-chan is lying?" Ishizaki-kun asked.

"I can't say. What do you guys think? Is she lying?"

"I heard it's almost impossible for popular girls to not have any experience with romance," he replied. "Ah, a girl told me that, by the way..."

"I... I don't think Kushida-san would lie..." Kondou-kun looks like a playboy, but he's surprisingly a naive guy.

"Well, you never know. Ryuen said that Kushida-san was hiding something, and that her kind personality wasn't genuine," said Sakazaki-kun.

Based on his words, it seems like Ryuen really *did* say something to them without being too specific. It seems like they're still on the fence about whether I'm faking my personality or not.

Sakazaki-kun was one of the boys I rejected before. Given how he seemed to be leaning on doubting me, he must be holding a grudge.

"If Kushida-san is really faking it, then she would've forgotten our name by now, right?" Komiya-kun followed.

"Why don't we find out then? Hey, Kushida-san, do you even remember our names?" Nagaoka-kun asked with a condescending tone.

Uwahh, he's disgusting. Like, Sakazaki-kun, I also rejected his confession before. And unfortunately for me, he didn't take my reply well. I'm really glad Hirata-kun managed to save me. Anyway, It's obvious that he was holding that rejection against me. He even looked excited when Ryuen suggested sexually assaulting me. Just die, scum.

"Your names...? Um, w-why should I-?"

"Just do it! Or what? Are you saying that we're not even relevant in your mind now? You even acted like we were close friends back then!" Nagaoka-kun raised his voice.

What's with this guy?! You were the one who started talking to me! You were the one who acted like we were close, you creep! You even hit on me even though we just met! Of course, you're no longer relevant in my mind! It never had a place for you in the first place, you ugly loser! You think you're hot just because you're in the baseball club?! I bet Kiyotaka-kun would do better than you if he practiced baseball for a few hours!

But this is good. He's getting riled up. Acting weak makes your oppressor feel more empowered. And idiots will have heightened emotions which causes their brains to function less efficiently. That's why it's easy to make an idiotic oppressor tick. That's what Kiyotaka-kun had told me before.

Alright, Kikyuu. You got this. Look upset, but not too annoyed. Look afraid, but not too over the top.

"Um, I wouldn't forget people that easily. You're Nagaoka Ichiro-kun, right?"

"Tch, so at least you remember."

He clicked his tongue and looked away with a slight blush. His heart couldn't help but skip a bit after I innocently uttered his full name without any hint of misremembrance. Heh, what a simple guy.

"What about me?!" Ishizaki asked excitedly.

Read the room, you moron!

"You're Ishizaki Daichi-kun."

I used my index finger to limply point at each of them.

"Ryuen Kakeru-kun, Yamada Albert-kun, Komiya Kyougo-kun, Kondou Reo-kun, Sonoda Masashi-kun, Yoshimoto Kousetsu-kun, Rakuyama Jin-kun, Demura Atsushi-kun, Sakazaki Masato-kun, and Aragaki Ryou-kun..."

The moment I finished, Ryuuen started clapping hands as he laughed. It seems like my facade greatly amused him.

"Wow! Would you look at that? She remembers all of our names. Do you remember the name of every guy in school?" he asked.

"What...?"

What is this guy trying to say...?

"I heard that you were also popular during your middle school days. Wanna tell us about that?"

"I... just liked making a lot of friends."

"That's strange. Based on what I know, the only student from your previous school is Suzune. Aren't you sad that none of your old friends are with you?"

He knows about Horikita...? Wait, did she-? No, that's impossible. Even if Horikita hated me, there was no way she'd help Ryuuen.

"I have a dream for the future. That's why I chose this school," I replied without sounding provoked, but there was no way Ryuuen wouldn't notice my shivering legs.

Damn it... I really didn't want to drag Kiyotaka-kun into this. He should be strong enough to fight Ryuuen and a few others, but there's just too many of them, and they're armed too. There's Yamada-kun as well.

I sneaked a glance at the shutter. Is that the only way out? How can I escape with Kiyotaka-kun...? Once he gets here, Yamada-kun will probably block us. If he can take him out or at least get him out of the way, then he might be able to escape. But I might not be fast enough to follow him without getting caught by Ryuuen or the others...

And besides, I still have no way out of the situation itself. Ryuuen knows my secret, so he might reveal it to everyone in school if I try to escape...

"Say, Kikyou..."

"Kyah-?!" I was too distracted to notice that Ryuuen had closed in on me.

"Did you like slapping your friends around as well?" he asked.

"W-What...?"

"Or what? Did you use your boyfriends to crush other girls?" After asking that, Ryuuen's sinister smile widened, but surprisingly, my fear started to fade.

Contrary to his expectations, a smirk suddenly appeared on my face. I leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

"I understand now, Ryuuen-kun. You... don't know the truth, do you?"

Vol. 7: Chapter 9.2 - The Real Me

I meticulously researched everything I could. I even went back to Sakuragoaka Junior High's official news page multiple times to get my facts straight. It's true that my sources were limited, but from the specific news article that I found, the girl in question perfectly matched Kikyuu's fake persona. There's no way I could confirm the details of the incident unless I get out there and interview Kikyuu's previous classmates, but that's impossible.

Even then, I was confident that the news article was talking about Kikyuu.

All this time, she was trembling. She understood that I knew something, but she also believed that Ayanokouji or Suzune wouldn't betray her. If that's the case, bluffing would be an option because she might've thought that I had no real source.

Was she bluffing? Only time will tell.

"Trust me, I know a lot. But are they the truth? I can't be sure. The news page of your previous school looked pretty reliable."

Kikyuu's smile disappeared and boundless anger could be seen in her eyes. How scary. Think about your admirers. They'd get badly disillusioned, you know?

"So that's where you got everything..." she said.

"Oh, you know about it? Your school website's news page, I mean."

"Of course, I do. I was one of the prominent sources of news in our school because of my influence back then. You should've seen my name pop up in a lot of the archived news."

"Indeed I have. You were always the shining light of hope and positivity everywhere you went, weren't you? You didn't lead any big projects, but you were always present at every school event. You were the school's go-to when asking for the students' collective opinion, and everyone was fond of you-- whether it was your peers or your teachers. Kushida Kikyuu was basically an idol."

Kikyuu started to look nervous once again. In other words, everything I've said so far were true.

"Where'd that newfound smile go? I thought you started regaining your confidence earlier?"

"Shut up..." she muttered under her breath.

"Heh... *"Girl Causes the Collapse of an Entire Class"*-- Does that ring

a bell?"

Kikyou's eyes opened wide. Bingo. It was all a bluff.

I knew I found the right sauce. It didn't matter if the name was hidden. The main subject of this news and the school idol Kushida Kikyou were basically one-to-one copies of each other in terms of how their personalities and roles were described.

"Do you think I'd only look at the official news? Your school was quite progressive by letting its students publish and propagate student-written news. That place was a lot better. Controversies regarding students were a hot topic, and issues and complaints about everything surrounding the school were widely debated. It was honestly a revolutionary idea for a Japanese school as long as the moderation was consistent."

ANHS has its own official website and forum, but the engagement wasn't as great. It was lacking some spice.

"Shut up!" She yelled as she dropped to her knees while covering her ears.

Ishizaki and the other guys slightly jumped in surprise. Is Kushida Kikyou finally going to reveal her true self? Even if she tried to contain her rage, everyone could already sense the subtle changes in her behavior. It seemed like her mask was starting to crumble.

"Hit too close to home, huh? This one was about you, wasn't it?"

I crouched down to Kikyou's level and pulled up the said page, showing it to her. It contained the written details on what was published about this particular *incident*.

"..." She stared at my phone and stayed silent.

"Answer me or I'll expose you to the whole school right now."

"Yes, it was," she begrudgingly responded.

"That's a good girl. Now tell me. Do you still think I don't know the truth?"

The news was very interesting. A popular girl whom everyone liked turned out to be secretly dating up to six guys at the same time while also being in a relationship with a number of high schoolers from other schools. She also used her high school boyfriends to violently punish girls who didn't like her outside of school grounds. On graduation day, a classmate found out about this and revealed it to the class. The guys she got involved with started fighting and the girls she maltreated started breaking from the trauma, essentially causing the class to collapse. Luckily for the girl in question, the ceremony had ended and she managed to run away before suffering the consequences. That was the short summary of it, and the news was seemingly delivered with only factual statements devoid of any obvious bias.

Kikyou gazed down. She took a deep breath before looking back

up at me with an undaunted grin.

"Yep, that's right. You know nothing about the truth."

There was not a single trace of fear left in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"And why should I tell you?"

"Now this is troubling..."

"Ack-?!"

I suddenly grabbed her by the hair.

"Are you perhaps thinking that the tables have turned?"

"All of the contents in there are lies. None of what really happened was written, so- Ah-!"

Kikyous body toppled as I hit her with a backhand. Her head must've been shaken given how dazed she suddenly looked.

"It doesn't look like you're bluffing this time. Then, are you saying that Sakuragaoka's school news page is publishing a bunch of horseshit?" I continued asking.

"I... I don't know. They already published the news about me even when I was still a student-- months before graduation. I remember the headline, and I remember the details... The one you just showed me... was a completely different one. The headline may have been the same, but the publishing date and the contents weren't. Nothing like that happened in our school during graduation. It's all fabricated."

I grabbed Kikyou by her temples, gripping her face.

"U-Ugh-!"

Her breathing, her expression, her eyes... She's telling the truth. Since that's the case, there's no way for me to know the reality of her past now. I wonder what happened? Would a school really let lies be published?

What a bummer. I lost my strongest card, but I'm not too worried. My plans won't get stopped by just that. Not this time.

"Fabricated, huh? But the students of this school would have no way of knowing that. I could just publicize this page and drag your reputation down the dirt, you know?"

I pasted the link on our class's forum page. In a single tap, the link will be posted for everyone in my class to see. And that's not the end. Even if these forums were set up for each class, other students aren't restricted from accessing any of them. In other words, I can post the link to the news article in every possible forum page. Whether or not the contents of the news were true doesn't change the fact that the website is legitimate. And because we have no contact outside, the students can't possibly fact-check this without going through tedious steps.

"S-Stop! Ack-!"

She tried to grab my phone, but I kicked her in the stomach. She held the part I struck before I smacked the side of her face. Kikyou dropped to the ground. I grabbed her hair once again. She tried to pull my hand away, but she had no strength left in her after my kick.

Even Ibuki and the others didn't expect it. What are they worried about? Snakes like Kikyou are very durable, you know?

"H-Hey, Ryuuen! What are you doing? She's clearly powerless to resist!"

"Shut up, Ibuki. This is where the fun begins."

"You're sick. I'm not gonna sit here and watch this."

Ibuki and some of the guys went somewhere else. I didn't really care. I wasn't doing this to entertain them. I was breaking Kikyou for my own pleasure.

"Let's drill it into your mind, shall we? That you're nothing but a worthless fake."

This is it. Kushida Kikyou's lowest point. It was the moment I was waiting for.

I wonder... How did things get to this point...?

"Heh, can't you see? You're still in checkmate no matter what luck you have, Kikyou. This is what happens when you show who you really are. No one will save you."

My face felt hot and painful, and my nose bled a little. Ryuuen kept slapping me, and he kept berating me. My brain was starting to blank out. I see. I was being tortured in some way. How many minutes has it been?

"S-Stop... it."

If I could choose between receiving his words and getting wounded, I'd rather have the latter.

"The mental and physical stress had reached its peak. It's about time I give her a way out."

Ryuuen said something, but I can't understand him properly. My ears were ringing.

"How about this, Kikyou? I'll leave you alone if you do me a favor. I won't post the link, and I'll stop using your past against you either." He crouched down and explained.

I coughed and panted. Cold sweat trickled down my forehead and bits of tears probably formed under my eyes.

"W-What... do you want from me?" I asked.

The words came out of my mouth before I could even think.

Comply, comply, comply... Just follow... Be nice. That was how I became loved by everyone. That was how I survived. I can curse them however I want later. But right now, I must make them happy so they won't hate me. That was my way of life. Everyone's love and affection was my happiness.

Is this the cost of me trying to be true to myself...?

"Sonoda, give it to me," Ryuuken said.

Sonoda-kun approached us while holding a brown envelope. He was pretty close with Hirata-kun, being part of the same club. I wonder what kind of face he was making right now. I couldn't see it clearly. Ryuuken took out the paper inside and presented it to me.

A paper...? A contract? What is it about...?

Ahh... My brain is too tired to think. My eyes are too moist to read the small letters... My cheeks feel numb. I don't even know if I can talk properly. Maybe it'll swell. My stomach hurts a lot too... I just want to lie down and sleep.

"Just sign this, and it'll be all over. In this contract, I'll be punished if I try to harm you or your reputation. In exchange, you just have to cooperate with me in secret."

"It'll be... over...?"

This is bad... The feeling of relief is making me sleepy.

"Yes, it will. I'll let you walk away scot-free. I can even have Ibuki guide you back if you're in pain."

Yes... That would be... great...

"Here's a pen. You don't have to think about anything anymore. Just trust me."

Trust... I see... Trust, huh?

"Go ahead," he said, giving the pen and paper to me. "Sign this and everything will be okay."

Okay...?

"O..."

"Do you agree?"

"O-O..."

"O...?"

"Over my dead body, you scum."

With the last of my strength, I threw the pen and paper to the side.

"Ahh, I see. It's a shame. It's a real shame. I didn't want to do this, but you've left me no choice. You managed to hide the truth, but it won't save you from the lies. Do your best in trying to repair your image-- or what's left of it."

Ryuuken tapped on his phone. He posted the link on his class's forum page.

"Hey, you guys," he addressed Ishizaki-kun and the others. "Copy that link and post it on other classes's forum pages. Use a dummy account, and don't forget to say that it's about the one and only Kushida Kikyou."

With this, Kushida Kikyou will cease to be the perfect angel of Class A. What should I do? If I try to fix this mess, then I'd have to continue lying. With my social skills, I might be able to mend things after some time, but I don't know if it's even worth it. In the end, everyone will know what school I came from, and once we graduate, those who still want the truth will know the real me.

I'm tired. I've convinced myself that the love my fake self received gave me happiness, but I... felt happier when someone cherishes the real me.

"Color me impressed. You didn't betray your class even after all of that."

This is fine. I'm tired of thinking anyway.

The moment I saw Horikita on that bus, I started thinking... and thinking. How do I get rid of her? How can I protect my new life? That was probably the beginning of the end for me.

Things changed bit by bit, and even I thought *I* could change. Maybe I would've-- if none of this happened, but it was too late for regrets now. I was prepared to lose the things I'd built after coming here. Why was that, I wonder? I thought this way of life was everything to me. I thought I'd sacrifice everything else for it.

Either way, I wouldn't have gotten this far if it wasn't for Kiyotaka-kun. He was the one who told me that I could change. He'd saved me many times. He'd listen to me when I needed a friend. He really helped me in various ways.

Ah, that's right. Kiyotaka-kun. He's on his way here.

Damn it... I hope I had the strength left to give him a call. I want him to turn back and run away from here. It's dangerous, after all.

Even in a situation like this, I'm still concerned about him. I'm such an angel, aren't I?

Haha, I see. The reason why I was prepared to lose everyone's affection... makes sense now. It's because I finally have someone that I can truly trust. And it's not just Kiyotaka-kun either. There's Ryuuko-chan, Mii-chan, and Kokoro-chan as well.

If there's a tomorrow for me, I want to tell them the truth.

I hope they don't hate me too much after reading that fake news.

And I hope they accept the real me.

Vol. 7: Chapter 10.1 - The Stage Has Been Set

December 22nd, Wednesday.

"Parts of the school will undergo renovations, so those areas will be off-limits. Also, all clubs will take the day off after the closing ceremony. Be sure to head back as soon as you can."

Chabashira-sensei didn't dismiss us immediately but instead scanned the classroom which confused a lot of students.

"Is everything alright, Sae-chan-sensei?" asked Ike.

"Hmm, I'm sure that some of you will think about your inevitable demotion back to Class C next month, but don't panic. Keep yourselves out of trouble during winter break and come back stronger next semester. That's all."

With that, she ended the class, closing the curtains for the second semester.

Our classmates didn't expect her words, but they certainly kept them in mind. We needed to accept the fact that we're done being Class A starting January. However, no one thought it was gonna be something permanent.

Everyone was prepared to leave. It was currently 12:17 PM, and all students will now be able to enjoy their Christmas break.

I glanced at Kikyuu who planned on hanging out with her friends at Keyaki Mall. Ike's group merrily walked out of the classroom and Karuizawa's group chatted about their plans. The rest were busy grouping up with their friends.

The Ayanokouji Group wasn't an exception. I gathered my things and walked towards them.

"Keyaki Mall will be packed today, so let's get there as soon as we can," said Akito.

"Woohoo! We're finally free!" Haruka celebrated with Airi.

"What about you, Kiyotaka? Are you gonna come with us?" asked Ken.

"I'm actually not sure. I don't like walking around big crowds and I *am* pretty tired, so I'm tempted to just go home and sleep."

"Aww, that's a bummer. We're gonna have lots of fun without you~!" The teasing Haruka tried to provoke me.

"I hope you do. I'm also gonna have lots of fun in Dreamland," I replied.

"You're not going to come with us?" Airi asked with a hopeful face.

"Hmm, I'm really not sure, but I guess I can walk with you guys there at least."

"Kiyotaka-kun~!" Kikyou called and gestured for me to approach her group.

"What's up?" I asked.

She smiled as everyone turned to Mii-chan.

"Um, Ayanokouji-kun... Can I speak with you later? Ah, if you're busy, then I don't mind if it's not today..."

"If it's important, then I don't mind. I don't really have any plans today."

"Really~?! Okay, I understand."

"Alright! We'll go to Keyaki Mall now, okay? Catch up with us later if you can," Kikyou winked at Mii-chan.

Her group waved at us as they left the room.

I told my friends to go ahead of me as well. They left looking interested as to why I suddenly had to be alone with Mii-chan. I would love to explain, but it's not like I knew what was going on either.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked as the two of us started ambling along the hallways.

"Hmm, for now, why don't we get something to eat? Is that okay? I know we just had lunch earlier but..."

"I'm fine with it."

"Really?! Then, let's go to Pallette. There's a drink I've always wanted to try."

Mii-chan had a cheerful attitude, but I noticed that something was strange. She wanted to talk about something, but she's not saying anything. It felt like she was trying to stall for time. She's hesitating.

This pattern clearly means something, and after some experiences, I think I know where this is going.

The two of us enjoyed our time in Pallatte and talked about a lot of mundane stuff, and before we knew it, the time was already 1:49 PM. I did my best to accompany Mii-chan, and it seemed like she was finally starting to feel more at ease.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can you come with me to another place? I said I wanted to talk about something, but I just selfishly dragged you here to hang out. I promise this will be the last time I'll bother you like this, so..."

"It's alright. You're not being a bother. I'm having fun as well."

"Thank you..." She smiled.

I messaged a certain person about my whereabouts and the slight change in timing. After that, we made our way to the resting area near Keyaki Mall. A few students were sitting around, but the place was quite spacious, and everyone was minding their own business. It was a very aesthetic place that had a very similar visual experience to that of a nice park. If it wasn't next to a mall, I think the grassy area would be a nice place to have a picnic.

Mii-chan and I sat across from each other on the marble seats separated by a small table. She fidgeted nervously, but I waited for her to speak. After taking a deep breath...

"There's been something that I've been meaning to tell you... for a while now," Mii-chan said. "I just didn't have the courage to do it for the longest time."

I didn't reply. I feel like anything I'd say would just get her out of her flow.

Mii-chan looked around and saw no one near us. Even if she yelled a little, there was no chance for the handful of distant people in the same area to hear or understand what she was saying. She nodded as if to pump herself up.

"Ayanokouji-kun... I... I've always liked you. I've liked you since the first day of school!"

Her eyes were closed and her hands were shivering.

"Thank you, Mii-chan. It must've taken you a lot of courage to say it."

For earnest yet shy girls like her, I was told that it's better to acknowledge their efforts.

"U-Um, thank you!" She frantically waved her hands in front. "You don't have to answer me. I know I'm gonna get rejected, so I confessed just to get the weight off my chest. I mean, the one who gave me the final push was Ryuuko-chan's confession. When she told us that she finally felt free, I thought I'd feel the same way if I confessed to you."

"Is that how it works?"

"Well, it depends on the situation... I guess?"

In this type of conversation, order matters a lot.

"I see... Thank you, Mii-chan, for telling me your feelings. I'm grateful that you feel that way about me."

"Oh, no. It's me who should thank you... for listening to my request."

"It's not a problem. I hope we can stay as friends."

"T-That's what I intended to happen in the first place! The same thing happened with Ryuuko-chan and Kokoro-chan, didn't it? I

won't stop being friends with you just because you rejected me!" She suddenly chuckled. "Wait, that's wrong. Technically, I haven't been rejected. I don't know if that's a good thing or not."

"That's up to you, I guess."

"I don't think it matters since I already know how *you* feel. Whether I get rejected or not, it won't change the fact that you can't return my feelings... and it hurts, but that's okay."

At this point, there was nothing I could say. I let Mii-chan pour out her feelings and made sure that she knew I was there to listen.

"Thank you for going along with my selfishness, Ayanokouji-kun. Let's stay as friends, okay?"

"Of course," I replied.

We stayed quiet for a while-- just observing our serene surroundings. And then I broke the silence with a question.

"If you don't mind me asking, what did you mean when you said that confessing to me would set you free?"

"Hmm... You see, Ayanokouji-kun, if you think someone won't return your feelings, wouldn't it be better to just confess and get rejected? Hiding is too much a burden and it makes moving on harder for a lot of people."

I've seen similar stuff in books. At first, I thought it was illogical to confess when you know there's nothing to gain, but I guess getting rejected does gain you something if you have the right mindset.

"I see. It's like you're being given a reason to properly move on. That's certainly a nice way to put it."

"In other words; a closure." Mii-chan nodded with a gentle smile. "Ahh, that was so nerve-wracking! Ryuuko-chan was right-- it does feel lighter on the chest! Now then, I'm sure they're wondering how my confession went, so I'll be going to Keyaki Mall and meet up with them."

"You'll be at the karaoke, right?"

"Yep." Mii-chan stood up from where she sat.

"Enjoy yourselves."

She bid her farewell with a big smile.

Mii-chan is an honest girl who has a hard time hiding how she feels. That's why I can tell that she wasn't just putting up a tough front. Her confession was set up in a way that softened the blow as much as possible. She witnessed her friends get rejected first, and she came in expecting a bad result. She had zero expectations which lessened the damage to her heart.

So something like that can happen as well, huh? How very interesting.

"I'm already here," he said on the phone.

After walking for a while, I finally found him standing behind an inconspicuous corner. I hung up, and the face of Horikita Manabu became increasingly more recognizable as I approached him.

"It's already 2:28 PM. Are you sure you didn't take too much time?" he asked.

"Not at all. In fact, it's not even time yet." After all, I know exactly when it's my cue to go.

"Kikyou is already there and Ryuuen is probably trying his best to get her cooperation."

I showed him the text message that Kikyou sent me through Ryuuen's phone around twenty minutes ago.

"Rumors?"

"You were also from Sakuragaoka, but you wouldn't have known what happened when Kikyou was in her last year there."

"I bet it's something that she doesn't want me to know. I'm not interested either."

"I know, and that's not why I called you here. Ryuuen wanted to enact his revenge on me, and he used Kikyou to lure me out. At the same time, he also wants her cooperation in the future to take our class down. I'm here to put a stop to all of that, and your job is to act as a witness. A few minutes from now, something big will happen in one of those warehouses. You don't need to come in contact with any of Ryuuen's classmates, but they need to see you on their way out. I just need them to be aware that you were around," I explained.

"So this was your second request."

"Yes, it would help me a lot if you take on this role."

"You don't have to worry. We made a deal, so I'm simply honoring it."

"Then I'll do the same."

The older Horikita nodded in response.

I dialed up a certain number and the recipient instantly picked up.

"How is everything going over there?" asked the woman behind the other end of the line.

"It's all going according to plan, Sensei. How is it on your end?"

"We're on standby. Are you sure Ryuuen will post that link?"

"Yes. Keep it active until he does."

"That's not a problem. We'll receive a ping once he makes a post. I'm sure you will too."

"That will help a lot." I hung up without much issue.

A few minutes later, the notification finally came in. Ryuuen had

posted the link to the forum.

"So he used Sakuragaoka's website, huh? How did you come up with a solution to all of this?"

"Let's just say that I had to prepare for a long time to get this far."

The older Horikita sighed before asking me one last question.

"Do you think Kushida gave in?"

"It doesn't matter. Whether she says yes or not wouldn't make a difference in the final outcome."

"That's not really much of an answer, is it?"

He wanted to ask for my opinion. If that's the case...

"I... would like to think that she didn't," I replied.

"I see. Well, wrap this up quickly," he said.

I nodded before walking to the designated warehouse guarded by Yamada Albert.

It's time to finish this up, Ryuen.

Author's Notes:

In canon Volume 7, Kiyotaka tried to use Chabashira-sensei in three different ways: as his accomplice, as his way to stall time, and as a source of information. He knew her chances of cooperation were next to nothing, so he already had a contingency plan ready by using Manabu instead. He then successfully stalled time by extracting some important information from her about the rules and the system.

In this volume, Chabashira-sensei wasn't needed as her involvement from behind the scenes was more important. And besides, Manabu was already guaranteed to be his accomplice due to the tighter nature of their cooperation. Also, because Chabashira-sensei and Kiyotaka are allies, he already knew about the information he found out in canon Volume 7 way before the Sports Festival started (not because Chabashira-sensei willingly told him, but because he just had more opportunities to extract said information in similar, non-hostile ways). Lastly, he planned on stalling time with his friends at Keyaki Mall, but he went along with Mii-chan because it was also a viable option.

Vol. 7: Chapter 10.2 - What Are You Talking About?

It didn't take long until my presence was noticed. Yamada Albert turned to me, waiting for my approach. I sedately walked towards him and stopped. I didn't know much about Albert other than the fact that he was one of Ryuuen's underlings.

He motionlessly stood there, fixing his gaze past me.

"Don't worry, I didn't bring anyone. No one else will come here, so you go inside too."

I spoke to him in English because I thought it'd be faster. He looked at me with a reluctant body language.

"Ryuuen and the others won't be able to stop me. They will definitely need you there."

"..." He seemed to have understood that I wasn't joking around.

I see. So Yamada Albert is the type to think about things rationally. He opened the shutter without saying a word.

The dark interior of the warehouse was dimly lit by the light outside. However, even that started to fade as the gray clouds in the sky threatened rain. I saw Kikyou near the center. She was devoid of vigor and her body struggled to stay sitting. With the noise that the shutter made, everyone inside knew that I had arrived.

Apart from the only Class D girl which was Ibuki, there were twelve guys including Ryuuen. As expected, they had more than enough weapons for each person.

"Look who's here. It's Kikyou's knight and shining armor. Though I guess that's really not appropriate given how beat up your princess is," he taunted.

"Kiyotaka...-kun..."

"Sorry, I'm late."

"R-Run away... They're going to hurt you!"

Albert closed the shutter, extinguishing our chances of escape.

"It'll be fine. I'll get you out of here," I said.

Hearing that, some of the guys grimaced. They probably wanted to say something, but none of them tried to talk. This wasn't surprising since they were in Ryuuen's presence.

"You say some funny things, Ayanokouji. Surely, you already know what's going to happen now that you're here."

"It doesn't matter to me. I came here because I had something to do, and that's to get Kikyuu. She sent me a text message using your phone, didn't she?"

"Heh, are you trying to give your girl some reassurance? I didn't think you were the type to do that."

I saw a pen and paper littered on the ground. I see... She didn't betray the class until the end.

"You can think whatever you like, and you can do whatever you want. It seems like your classmates are itching to do something by now as well."

Ryuuen's smile didn't fade, but he started feeling a little bit suspicious.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you brought a teacher or two with you." He glanced at Albert who calmly shook his head in denial. "But I guess you didn't. You came alone, for that matter. What are you planning?"

"What do you think? I came here just like you wanted. Aren't *you* the one planning something?"

Our conversation started going around in circles which upset Ibuki.

"What the hell are you guys talking about?! If you're gonna throw hands, then stop using your mouths!"

However, it seems like Ryuuen was waiting for her to talk.

"Isn't this a perfect opportunity? You wanted to test Ayanokouji's fighting skills, right, Ibuki? You can't really do that if he's bruised and battered, so why don't you do the honors?" He smirked as if he was about to watch something amusing.

I looked at the weak Kikyuu. Her physical condition didn't look too bad at first. Her lips and nose were bleeding a little and her face might slightly swell, but she didn't sustain any obvious long-lasting injuries. But I noticed a shoe mark on her blazer which meant that Ryuuen kicked her around the stomach area. That was probably the reason why she can't stand. Eventually, that injury will turn into a large bruise.

However, her physical injuries weren't as bad as her mental state. Looking at her expression, it was probably in tatters. Ryuuen must've targeted her weakness and insecurities about being a fake person. With some of the guys watching it happen, along with the repeated physical assault, Kikyuu's mind probably spiraled.

"You told me that you could beat Ryuuen before didn't you?" glared Ibuki.

The other guys started laughing as if they heard something ridiculous.

"I did. What about it?" I asked her.

"Nothing. I was just trying to make sure."

"Wow! Why didn't you tell me about something so interesting, Ibuki?" Ryuuen asked enthusiastically before narrowing his eyes. "Was that Ayanokouji's honest evaluation?"

"I don't know, but that's what he said."

"If you didn't disagree with him, then he's probably not just being arrogant. I'm confident in my ability to fight, but I wonder how I'll do against someone who trained properly." Ryuuen shrugged his shoulders in nonchalance while implying that I was trained.

He knew how prideful Ibuki was. If she didn't dismiss me, then my words weren't without basis. Even he got to experience it firsthand when I perfectly deflected his strike during the Deserted Island Exam.

The guys who were laughing earlier suddenly fell silent. Every single one of them knew how athletic I was during the sports festival. If I was someone who had also trained in martial arts, then that should set off a few alarm bells. Ibuki was stronger than most of them and she was a girl. If Ibuki was wary of my strength, then they couldn't underestimate me.

"I knew you were faking it when we were on that island."

I ignored him and slowly walked to the center.

"Oh, you want her back? Here, take her." Ryuuen shoved Kikyou with a kick.

"Ugh-!"

I caught her body before it struck the ground entirely. It would've been dangerous if her head hit the concrete.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun... please... get out of here."

"You came here to protect Kikyou's secret, didn't you? But sorry to say, I already posted it. Now everyone in school can read about the wonderful deeds of Kushida Kikyou."

"I... I don't care anymore. I don't care, so please... run away..."

"There's nothing to worry about," I whispered. "Just trust me."

Hearing those words, Kikyou's shivering gradually stopped.

"I know you shared the link, Ryuuen. And I also know that the link is nothing but an empty webpage now."

"What?"

"Why don't you see for yourself? You'll know what I mean."

As Ryuuen looked at his phone, the confident look in his eyes suddenly wavered.

"Heh, you're right. There's nothing here anymore. Did you do this, Ayanokouji?"

"I can't say I'm not involved with it."

This strategy wasn't perfect. There might've been a few students who'd reached the page before our associates managed to delete it.

And once said page is loaded, they can at least copy or take a screenshot of the contents before it disappears. I wouldn't be surprised if it gets reuploaded somewhere as soon as later. However, I'd already taken that margin of error into account.

"I see... I see now. The news that I found was about a *fake* incident. Were you responsible for that too?"

"Well, I can't let you know about the truth. It'll give you too much to work with."

"That makes me *very* curious. How in the world did you manage to manipulate the official website of Kikyou's middle school?"

"That's a trade secret."

"Kukuku... How amusing! So right from the start, you knew that I'd target Kikyou and that I'd use her past against her!"

"More or less. I also knew that you had to wait until today because you were busy gathering weapons."

"So you also found out about that, huh? Why didn't you stop it?"

"Your plan wouldn't have proceeded if your operation was busted before it even began, right?"

"Hoh, and as a result, *your* plan wouldn't move forward either. That's why you let things be."

"Are you finally realizing it now?"

"I thought I had you on edge, but I guess that's not the case."

"Right. All this time, *you* were the one dancing to *my* tune."

"Did you hear that, Kikyou? Your beloved best friend planned everything from the start. In other words, your suffering was also part of his plan!"

I looked at Kikyou who had an expression of pain.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun..." she beckoned for me to go to her.

When I got near, Kikyou embraced my head gently before asking in a feeble whisper.

"Was this really... part of your plan...?" Her tears started to flow.

"No, I didn't think Ryuuen would go this far." That was the truth. I knew that Ryuuen had no plans to spare Kikyou's reputation, so I made the posting of the link my cue to enter the scene. I may have expected him to torment Kikyou before I got here, but not to this extent.

"Then, that's fine..." Kikyou's embrace got stronger which gave me a familiar feeling. "You won't run away... Does that mean... you'd win?"

"Yeah, I'd win."

"Okay... I trust you. Please... be careful."

Kikyou let go of me, and she wiped her tears as I stood up.

"Ryuuen, can we just beat this guy up now? I'm starting to get sick of this."

"I have to agree."

If I remember correctly, those two are Nagaoka and Sakazaki. They're the ones I thought would be here other than Ryuuen's closest subordinates. There's also Komiya, Kondou, Yoshimoto, Demura, Rakuyama... and Sonoda whom I didn't expect to see here as much as I did the others.

"Quiet, you two. I know you're jealous that Ayanokouji gets to be so touchy with the girl you wanna be intimate with, but you'll get your time soon." He turned around to face me. "So, what did she tell you?"

"Don't worry. It had nothing to do with you."

The guys became increasingly restless apart from Sonoda who had a curious expression. It didn't seem like his involvement was personal.

"You really know how to spoil the fun, don't you, Ayanokouji?" Ryuuen shook his head while chuckling. "Well, I'd have to agree that this talk had gone on for too long. But before things get more exciting, you have to at least answer the question you dodged earlier. Just what in the world are you planning?"

"I want to know as well," said Ibuki.

"You've bested me quite a few times before, so I find it hard to believe you don't have a plan. After all, didn't you orchestrate this entire thing?"

I answered with silence and gave Kikyou one final glance.

"You wouldn't think I'm bluffing, would you? After seeing what I did to Kikyou, you still don't believe I'd do it?"

"Are you really going to resort to violence?" I asked.

"War isn't just a battle of wits, you know? No amount of strategy or thinking can go against violence if it's knocking right in front of your door. My plan is to wipe that calm look off your face and replace it with fear. And then, I'll burn the image of your mangled body into my mind." Ryuuen narrated his vicious scheme with a grin. "Now tell me? What's your plan against that?"

"You were the one who said that we think alike, weren't you?"

"Kukuku... That's right! Does that mean you want to use violence as well? Was that *your* plan this whole time? Was this the stage you prepared?!" Ryuuen's sinister smile reached its peak. "As expected, you're the real deal! Show me what you got, Ayanokouji!"

The Class D guys started gripping their weapons. Everyone in this room knew about Ryuuen's capacity for violence. Most likely, they've all experienced it themselves. That's why his words also carried a lot of weight. Some of them might've thought this was overkill, but I was the one person that Ryuuen was on guard against. After seeing me stand here without any trace of fear and

after hearing my provocative words, they probably felt that I wasn't all talk.

"Can I start this off alone, Ryuuen?" To everyone's surprise, Sonoda suddenly gave his suggestion.

"Oh? What's this about, Sonoda? You have something fun to offer?"

"Well, I'm a guy with a similar build, and as a member of the soccer club, I'm fairly athletic myself. I'm sure I'd fit the bill for someone who wants to tread the unknown." Sonoda gave his suggestion with a relaxed demeanor. "And besides, I'd feel pathetic if I gang up on Ayanokouji with the others. Even if I lose, at least I fought him alone."

"Heh, is that so? Sure, why not?" Ryuuen shrugged without a care.

Sonoda fearlessly walked in front of me and spoke in a very low voice.

"If you're as strong as they're making you out to be, then I'd appreciate it if you knock me out as soon as possible," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. What Ryuuen did to Kushida left a bitter taste in my mouth, so I wanted a reason to lessen my involvement as soon as possible."

"I see." It's not like he could just stop Ryuuen from doing what he did. His orders were absolute.

"I was half-forced into this, but I also admit that I've been curious about your strength. I'm not really into fighting, but I won't hold back, okay?"

Judging from his frame, I'd say he's equal to someone like Hirata or Akito. Whether he's stronger than them would depend on his experience with fights.

"Alright, I understand."

Sonoda took his stance and stopped smiling, choosing not to wield a weapon out of pride. His form is pretty good, to say the least.

"Hmp!" He lunged forward for a quick and precise jab to my face while defending his left side.

I'll grant your wish, Sonoda. I'll finish this in an instant.

I mirrored his approach and closed the distance. Sonoda's punch hit the air while my perfectly timed counterattack struck his unguarded chin.

"Ack-!"

With that, Sonoda's body dropped to the ground. I guess that's one down.

"Are you... serious about this, Ayanokouji...?"

"What kind of question is that, Ibuki? Isn't this what you wanted?"

Ibuki clenched her fists at my answer. Just one more push and...

"You were also assigned to test the waters, so come at me and get this over with."

"You and Ryuuen... Both of you... really piss me off!"

Ibuki ran at me and slowly shifted her body for a kick. She went on a flurry and her speed was fast. I wonder how strong she was compared to Horikita given her experience with martial arts.

"I told you not to fight like that while wearing your school uniform."

"What the hell...? What are you...?" Ibuki's assault was ferocious, but I dodged all her kicks without much trouble. She clicked her tongue in frustration, but she didn't want to stay surprised.

Meanwhile, the other guys started approaching nervously.

Pushing for another round, Ibuki leaped at me once more. I didn't move an inch which made her hesitate. Thanks to that momentary lapse in decision-making, I managed to find multiple ways to dispatch her quickly. Of course, I chose the one where I could hide the strength behind my blows. After predicting Ibuki's panicked movements, I dodged the oncoming kick and hit her face with the back of my hand, prompting my target area to be in clear view.

"Ugh-!"

I struck Ibuki's carotid sinus with my hand and she immediately lost consciousness. I caught her body and placed it a few feet from Kikyuu. That much should be fine. It's not like we're fighting to the death.

"That's two down," I muttered under my breath.

"So this is what you were hiding," said Ryuuen.

He didn't look surprised. In fact, he looked wildly amused.

"You can come at me all at once. It wouldn't make a difference anyway."

The guys clicked their tongues in annoyance. I was a rival student, and a rival in love for some. Receiving those arrogant words from me would inevitably hurt their fragile egos.

"Beat him up. Don't hold back and release all of your rage on him." Ryuuen egged them on. "If what happened to Kikyuu gets out, we're all done. Our only choice is to beat the crap out of Ayanokouji until he fears us too much to talk."

"Raah!" The group finally decided to come at me with their weapons in hand.

The first one to reach me was Yamada Albert. I felt his large presence coming from behind. His speed indicates some experience in combat. He didn't wield any weapon, but his thick arms were

more than enough to do the job. One good punch from him was enough to knock a healthy adult male out cold.

I turned around to face him. He probably expected me to duck his right swing given the position of his left arm, but he was wrong. I braced myself and caught Albert's punch with my left hand.

Smack

As expected, I'd take some damage from that. I felt the massive impact all the way to my shoulder.

I didn't have time to fully observe Albert's reaction behind those sunglasses as his left follow-up punch came at me from below. He didn't change his initial plan even with an unexpected response. However, I already knew that he actually switched his goal from hitting me to restraining me. He wanted to hold me down and let the others finish the job.

Contrary to his expectations, I twisted my body to dodge his second punch and used my right hand to grab his clothes. At the same time, I shifted my left hand to hold his wrist. Now this is nostalgic. I didn't think I'd use this move on a high school campus. It was one of the variants of the basic Judo throw called "Seoi Nage".

"Woah-?!"

In less than a second, I countered Albert's assault and threw him onto the others. With his weight and momentum, Aragaki and Demura didn't stand a chance. They were smothered by Albert's huge body and, in the process, hit their heads on the ground. Just like that, they fell unconscious.

"That's four down," I muttered.

"Grr!" Yoshimoto tried to swing horizontally to hit my side with a wooden rod, but I didn't need to fully avoid it. I shifted my position optimally to catch and hold his weapon in place.

"Ayanokouji!" Ishizaki loudly announced his presence behind me as he tried to swing down with his own wooden weapon.

"Don't shout like that if you're coming at me."

It was easy to dodge given his reckless form, so I managed to kick him away as he lost balance. Half a second after that, I slightly ducked to avoid Rakuyama's baseball bat aimed at my head. Like Ishizaki, he staggered after I kicked him from behind.

"Hrgg!" Komiya tried to hit my sheen with a metal pipe, but I was already aware of his plan given how much he looked at the area he wanted to target. So, I managed to block it with the bottom of my shoe. I then made a heavy step to press his weapon on the ground.

"Agh!" Komiya didn't let go in time so his fingers were also buried under the pipe while pressed against the weight of my footstep. Kondou came to my other flank. He thrust his two-by-two-

inch square wooden rod in a stabbing motion to deal damage on my unguarded side. It was the only way to get through the clutter without hitting anyone else.

"Ack-!" However, I was pretending to use my right hand this entire time to contest Yoshimoto for his weapon. Because Kondou fell for that, I managed to land a devastating right elbow to the side of his jaw as he approached, knocking him out in an instant.

Yoshimoto panicked at how fast everyone was dropping, so he gave up on taking his weapon back and used his other hand to punch me instead. His instincts were set on hitting me, so he followed up with a kick tout de suite after I dodged his punch. However, I already predicted this sequence and positioned myself appropriately. I waited for his kick down to the last millisecond before avoiding it.

"Oof-!" As a result, Yoshimoto's foot cleanly hit the head of the crouching Komiya.

"Ah, sor-! Gah-!" He panicked and didn't see the punch that hit him square in the face.

Like Ken, Komiya also played basketball, so I didn't want to fracture any part of his hands. After striking Yoshimoto down, I relaxed the foot that was stepping on his weapon and used the momentum of my twisting body to land another kick on his face, knocking him out cold.

"That's seven down." They wanted to overwhelm me with numbers before I could defend and counter in time. And to be fair, it was their only winning strategy. However, they'd still lose if they can't keep up with my speed.

"What the fuck... is this...?" Nagaoka couldn't believe his eyes.

I quickly analyzed the current situation. Around seven seconds passed since the brawl started. Albert managed to gain his footing again after I threw him. Ishizaki and Rakuyama gruntingly recovered from their fall. Nagaoka and Sakazaki were trying to find the right timing and angle, cautious of my speed and strength.

"Ten seconds haven't even passed, but more than half of us are already out. If you were this strong, why don't you show off your fighting skills more, Ayanokouji?" Ryuuen asked.

"There's no reason for me to do so."

"Hey, let's all come at him together! Don't let him isolate you!" shouted Rakuyama.

Albert nodded to his words and initiated the attack.

Isolate? When did I ever need to do that?

Now that their numbers had dwindled, I could probably handle Albert much easier than before. His punches are strong, so I shouldn't take too much of them. At the same time, I didn't know

how durable he was, so I didn't have the luxury of holding back either.

Fwish

I carefully dodged under his swing and punched him right in the gut. Even with that, Albert's lackluster reaction indicated that I'd dealt minimal damage. I guess that's to be expected. My fist felt the hardness of his body, so he must've been training for a long time. I have a few ways to crush him, but eliminating one or two more of the others should come first. That way, I could deal with Albert fast enough without getting interrupted too soon because none of them gave me any time to strike back at him.

Speak of the devil, Ishizaki and Nagaoka swung at my sides. I avoided Nagaoka's stainless steel rod while catching Ishizaki's strike.

"A-Arggh-! W-Wait! Ow!" I gripped his wrist which made him let go of his weapon.

Rakuyama and Sakazaki tried to hit me at the same time as well. They came at both sides, but if I dodged backward, I'd be in Albert's range. So, I grabbed Ishizaki and used his body to block Sakazaki's strike.

"Ugh!" Using the blindspot I'd created, I let go of Ishizaki and grabbed Sakazaki's neck. I knew that Nagaoka had come back to attempt another hit, so I twisted my body and, this time, I used Sakazaki's back to block his strike.

"Agh, fuck-!" After he got hit, I slammed Sakazaki's body on the ground which incapacitated him. And in the process, I managed to kick Nagaoka in the stomach as well.

Albert knew that I just needed to be stopped from moving. He charged at me without waiting for the others. Good, he's getting desperate. Ishizaki, Nagaoka, and Sakazaki were all in pain. Only Rakuyama was there to follow up.

This should be enough, I didn't need to isolate Albert to beat him anyway.

As I thought about that, Albert threw his massive punches while weaving his body in an orthodox stance. He must've been wary of my strength if he's upping his defense. I turned around to receive Rakuyama's swing and aimed for his jaw. Albert saw this and wanted to capitalize on it. The moment I hit Rakuyama, he'd gain a window of opportunity to grab me.

However, I was waiting for him to do just that. I couldn't care less about hitting Rakuyama. Albert lunged himself forward and noticed that I kept turning around until I faced him again. But when he realized what was going on, it was all too late.

"Rrgh!" He couldn't guard in time and I landed a decisive blow on

his solar plexus.

It was a clean hit to his liver, and the sudden drop in blood pressure caused him to collapse like his fallen comrades. With a loud thud, Yamada Albert was finally taken care of.

Ishizaki switched to his left hand to grab his weapon, and Rakuyama came in for a final charge. With the damage they'd sustained and their lack of confidence, I managed to strike them down without much effort.

"That's ten down," I sighed.

Sakazaki and Nagaoka were trembling. They'd lost their will to fight. The anger on their faces was replaced with despair.

"Kukuku, what a bunch of wusses." Ryuuen finally stopped watching from the back and approached me with a smile.

"I'm impressed you're still keeping your cool after seeing that play out," I said.

"I thought I didn't underestimate you, but I guess I still did. You're able to outsmart me *and* you're more skilled at using violence-- a worthy opponent." He clapped his hands in genuine respect.

"Are you going to fight me now?"

"Where's the fun in that? If I'm going to fight you, I'll fight you alone. And I know you have plans for these two. That's why you let them remain in the first place."

"I see. Your understanding is very convenient."

"G-Get the hell away from us!" Nagaoka and Sakazaki felt threatened and pointed their weapons at me.

Without giving them a chance to react, I suddenly dashed to close the distance. They swung in a panic and I struck their throats after dodging.

"Urgh-!"

I punched their faces with enough force to disorient them but not render them unconscious. Their visions were probably blurry, and their awareness was starting to fade away.

"Alright, they're all yours." My words weren't for Ryuuen but for someone else.

She panted heavily while holding a baseball bat, standing over the two-- looking down on them. Kikyou was finally in a position to strike back. She used her recovered strength to swing at their heads without hesitation. As I thought, she wasn't strong enough to inflict any serious injury. But even with that, Nagaoka and Sakazaki were still knocked out of commission.

Kikyou turned to Ryuuen with a vindictive glare. He was the one she wanted to crush more than those two. However, Kikyou knew that it was out of the question for her.

I put my hand on her shoulder, asking her to calm down and rest.

Kikyoun didn't utter a single word of reply. She simply went to the side and crossed her arms around her injured stomach.

That's twelve people collapsed on the ground. Apart from Kikyoun, only Ryuuen and I remained standing.

"You didn't even try to use any of the weapons I got here. I even procured some extras."

"Why would I when I don't need them? You should've understood that by now. It doesn't matter even if you had more people either."

And apart from the punch I caught from Albert, I didn't sustain any hits-- not even once.

"I clearly got the message," he replied.

Ryuuen and I slowly approached each other.

"Aren't you gonna use a weapon?"

"Why should I when you're not?"

"I don't know. It might help your chances."

Ryuuen shook his head as if I was talking nonsense.

"Do you know what I'd like to say now, Ayanokouji?"

"Nope."

Ryuuen's calm demeanor probably wasn't a bluff. It didn't matter if the tables were turned on him, or if he was the one cornered. His unyielding confidence is what enabled him to come this far.

"Physical strength alone doesn't determine victory or defeat. You gotta be tough on the inside too!"

He adjusted his stance so that he was lower to the ground before pouncing at me. He released a fast left jab to my abdomen instead of my face. I caught his left wrist with my right hand, but it was hard to punch back because of his position. Now that my dominant hand was occupied, Ryuuen didn't feel afraid to exchange blows with my left hand. However, I just deflected his right fist instead of attempting a cross-counter.

I grabbed Ryuuen's hair with my left hand, but his reflexes were fast and he managed to push my arm away. Unfortunately for him, his low stance makes him vulnerable to leg attacks if he stops paying attention.

"Guh-!" That's why I managed to land a hard, clean blow right to his chest using my knee. He immediately put some distance between us to avoid my follow-up attacks.

"Not bad, Ryuuen." He far surpassed Ishizaki and the others in overall strength. I was honestly impressed by his tenacity. I landed a serious hit, but he showed no signs of collapsing. That said, he still wouldn't be a match for Albert.

"This is so much fun!" Ryuuen laughed louder than before. "Turning the tables even after being brought to the pits of despair-- This isn't enough for me! I need more, Ayanokouji!"

He charged at me once more with the kind of movements I'd seen on the island.

"Haven't you had enough? You're not going to win."

"You think you won't lose?"

"Yeah, I can't really imagine myself losing."

With every exchange, it was Ryuuen who got hit.

"Hahh... Sure, you might win this time, but what about tomorrow? What about the day after? Or the day after that?"

"It doesn't matter. Even if we keep doing this over and over again, you'll never win."

"What about when you're in the middle of pissing? Or when you're taking a shit? I'll come after you when you least expect it," he insisted.

"Then you'll have to face a loss every time. It won't change no matter what you do. Aren't you afraid of that?"

"Afraid? Hah, I don't get afraid. I don't even feel fear!"

"You don't feel fear, huh?" Those words piqued my interest. The absence of fear is probably the source of Ryuuen's confidence. He wasn't afraid of loss and he didn't dread the consequences. That was rare for a human being.

"You sound like you don't understand," Ryuuen snorted in contempt. "What? Are you saying that you're like me-- that you don't feel fear either?"

"Hmm, that's not it."

"Then I'll make you feel fear through pain!"

"How are you going to do that? Earlier, you said you wanted to replace my calm expression with fear. I know what pain is, but it doesn't make me feel fear."

"You'll understand once you know the pain that *I* can inflict upon you!"

"So you're saying that yours is different? Interesting. Why don't you teach me about that pain then?"

"With pleasure!" Ryuuen grabbed my shoulders and kneed me in the stomach.

"Kiyotaka-kun!" Kikyuu called out in concern. She didn't need to be so worried. I took that attack on purpose.

"How about this?!"

Ryuuen aimed for the same spot with a brutal teep kick. He came at me without delay and started unleashing punches on my face. Of course, I guarded them with my arms. I left my torso open and Ryuuen happily took that opportunity. He twisted his body and hit me with a reverse roundhouse kick to the stomach. So far, that was Ryuuen's strongest blow. I staggered back and let the pain course through my entire body.

"How about it? You get it now?"

"Get what? This is just pain. Nothing more."

I knew all about fear born through pain-- I also knew about fear born through rejection. I've seen it with my own eyes. The terror and misery of those who were bound to lose-- I've seen them throughout my entire life.

Then what about me? Well, I felt a different kind of fear. I feared that someday, I might have to join those who despaired-- that someday, I might become the next loser. I feared I might feel the same fear that they felt. However, that day never came, and eventually, I understood that such a day would never come. That's why I stopped feeling fear. Instead, I just felt cold... because I've come to realize that no matter how much pain and suffering others experienced, the same would never happen to me.

If you have the means to protect yourself, then that's all you need. If you can keep yourself safe from harm, you win.

"Then I'll inflict some more pain until you finally feel fear!"

Ryuuen's violence wasn't anything new. In other words, this "pain" is pointless. Taking any more of it would just be a waste of time. If he keeps on hurting me, my body might cease its function, but I'll never feel fear. That's because the pain was something I've brought upon myself. I control it. Why would I fear something that I control?

Once again, Ryuuen relentlessly attacked me. He used the same pattern before trying to catch me off-guard. He suddenly picked up a metal pipe and swung it at me. I intercepted his surprise attack and countered with a punch to the side of his face.

"Ugh-! Tch, you saw through that?"

"I figured you'd have to do it at some point."

"Why didn't you dodge the easy blows earlier then?"

I didn't let myself get hit this time. Sustaining critical injuries wasn't an option if I wanted to clean up after this.

"I thought I could learn about fear if I let you inflict pain on my body. Unfortunately, I didn't learn anything. You didn't think you actually landed those hits on me earlier, did you?"

"You're one hell of a condescending bastard!"

Ryuuen might've sensed the gap between our strengths, but he didn't waver. Usually, the more confident a fighter was in their skill, the deeper the despair that overcame them once they understood how outmatched they were. However, I didn't get that feeling from Ryuuen. He wasn't blinded by rage either.

Of course, I already had an inkling that this could happen. The persistence he'd shown even after being repeatedly beaten by me was a good tell.

"When I asked Chabashira-sensei about where you came from, she couldn't answer me. What in the world are you? Where did you get that strength? You... are far from normal."

"Sneakily asking about someone else's private information isn't the most upstanding thing in the world, you know? I doubt any teacher would tell you anything."

"I just didn't ask. I tried to buy it as well. It worked for Kikyou, so why didn't it work for you?"

"Who knows? I personally don't think it matters."

"What a load of bullshit. I know it matters. I'd even bet an arm that it matters a lot!" Ryuuken ran and jumped at me for a big right hook.

"It's not like you're gonna know, so you don't have to worry about it so much." I dodged to the side and avoided him. But as soon as he landed, his whole body went low and he tried to sweep my legs. I jumped up to evade it while hitting his head with my own reverse roundhouse kick.

Ryuuken flew backwards and fell to the ground, but he wasn't unconscious.

"Agck-!" He slowly got up even after that. "You... You were about to show your power, but you decided to hide again just because you reached Class A? Does that mean no one is worthy in your eyes anymore? Heh, are you looking down on all of us?!"

"I've never looked down on anyone. Whether other people succeed or fail has nothing to do with me."

"Impossible. Humans are made of greed! We seek attention and we seek satisfaction! And we get that with others! We get that *from* others!" Ryuuken didn't seem to like my answer. He rejected the notion that a person could feel apathy to such an extent.

That might be true for the most part, but it's ignorant to generalize the entirety of modern humanity. There are many exceptions in this world. Even if most people can share different feelings, someone out there can be completely apathetic.

Of course, I'd experienced greed, among many other things, but that's not the important part.

"Come on, Ayanokouji! Let's play some more! Show me what's underneath that creepy, unchanging face!"

Well, anything I can say won't change Ryuuken's mind at this point. Chipping away at him until he loses the will to fight is impossible. So, I needed to do something drastic now.

Enough is enough.

I readied my stance as he got close. Ryuuken jumped, elevating himself high enough to deliver a knee to my face. As he grabbed my head, I deflected his right knee with my left palm.

"Kuh-!" I punched Ryuuen's right flank, opening his torso's defense.

He didn't let go of my head and tried grabbing onto my hair instead. He wanted to plant my face on the ground as he fell. That would've been dangerous if it wasn't part of my plan in the first place. I grabbed his clothes and slammed his whole body on the ground. I matched its speed with the descent of my own body.

"Gah-!" After such an impact, even Ryuuen would lose his grip.

His back was on the concrete floor and I got on top of him before he could do anything. I started barraging him with punches. If he guards his face, I'd strike his unprotected torso. If he tries to deflect it, his face would be wide open.

"You said you've never felt fear, didn't you, Ryuuen?"

"Ah... Hah... Heh, exactly. I haven't known fear-- not once in my life."

His face was bruised, and his eyes were nearly swollen shut. Even though Ryuuen tried to fight back, his strength was all gone. I wanted to stop his whole body from moving, so I landed a powerful blow to his abdomen. Feeling that the wind was knocked out of him, Ryuuen's expression turned stiff.

"I've lost a lot in my entire life, but that's why I kept winning in the end. That why- Ugh!"

Without any resistance in front of his face, I started delivering alternating punches in rapid succession. Blood trickled from Ryuuen's mouth.

"Keh... Ah, damn it. It's getting hard to talk." Even now, he showed no signs of fear.

"Violence shows you who people really are-- the ones doing the beating, and the ones being beaten." He closed his eyes and chuckled weakly. "Ahh... Ahaha. This is probably fun for you, Ayanokouji. With your strength, you can afford to be cocky. Hell, you can afford to be whatever you want-- even a harmless sheep!"

I hit him again. His face was badly beaten, but it didn't matter to me.

"Ow, that hurts. But as you said, it's just pain. There's no fear to be felt. Even if you win today, I'll keep coming at you. I won't let you rest until you finally break!"

I can see that he wasn't bluffing, but that just meant I had to hit him some more. Unlike me, he didn't have control over the violence inflicted upon him. It wasn't the same as mine.

Ryuuen probably survived this long by coming back from the ashes every time someone beats him down. He didn't care about the initial results, because he was confident that the final outcome was all that mattered. That's where his opponents would trip up. His

capacity for violence and his unpredictability in using it filled their hearts with fear.

"Go ahead. Enjoy this delight. You're right outside the door of victory," he taunted. "Doesn't it feel good? Winning against a weaker opponent, winning against a stronger opponent-- it feels great! And lurking underneath that pleasure... is fear!"

I struck his jaw which made a tooth fly out of his mouth. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I couldn't care less.

"What are you feeling, Ayanokouji?! Are you angry? Excited? Maybe you're frustrated? Tell me!"

Seriously, I don't understand why he's saying all of this. Anger? Excitement? Frustration? Why would I feel anything about something so dull?

I hit him again... and again... and again. At this point, Ryuen was just repeating words for the sake of it. I'd lost count of how many times I'd landed a blow on his face. He was the one getting beaten up, so why is he asking me about my feelings?

"W-What... d... feel...?" Ryuen's face got a bit distorted due to my punches, but he didn't stop talking. Maybe I should ask him while he's still conscious.

"Seriously, Ryuen. What are you talking about?"

The moment he heard my words, the look in Ryuen's eyes shifted dramatically. His face trembled as if he was looking at a monster.

Oh, how interesting.

I landed one last blow to Ryuen's face. It was the most powerful punch I'd thrown all day, and with it, he finally lost consciousness.

He couldn't answer me, but at least I managed to learn something else. Ryuen Kakeru was capable of feeling fear.

Vol. 7: Chapter 10.3 - Repercussions

I stood up and walked away from Ryuen's unmoving body. Turning around, I saw Kikyou crouching in pain. The blood on her face was already dry, and she was starting to feel cold.

"Sorry for putting you through this, Kikyou."

"It's okay... You won, and you got revenge for me." In a sense, she was right.

Kikyou's legs trembled as she tried to stand. I held her body, lending my shoulder to support her.

"What happened here today-- it'll never happen again. Ryuen won't use your past to threaten you anymore."

"It's alright, Kiyotaka-kun... To be honest, I think it's time for me to stop caring about my past. I've come to understand that what matters is what I do now."

"Are you alright with that?"

"I'm a fake, and I would've continued being *just* a fake if it wasn't for what happened today. Yes, I still love the attention that my fake self receives, but it doesn't have to be my everything. I finally got the resolve to stop being so extreme about my way of life," she said. "I want someone to look at my real self too. I thought that was impossible, but I guess beliefs really can change with time."

"I see... You want to tell your friends, don't you?"

"Yes..."

Kikyou wanted to continue speaking, but her phone suddenly buzzed nonstop. She took it out of her pocket and saw that a lot of messages had been sent to her. I'd also assume that they won't stop coming anytime soon.

"As expected, some people would still get their hands on it," she sighed.

Even Kikyou knew that at least one of the students could be coincidentally browsing the forum the moment Ryuen posted the link. There was enough delay between Chabashira-sensei and our associates outside for someone to load the page fully before it could be deleted.

An anonymous sender posted a bundle of screenshots on Class 3-B's forum page. Ryuen and his classmates also just sent the link, so everyone knew these screenshots were related to it. And with the caption saying that the fake incident was talking about Class 1-A's

Kushida Kikyou, virality was all but inevitable.

"This is not good. I don't mind if people find out where I'm from, but this fake incident just overcomplicates things. It's one thing if it's the truth, but it's all lies."

"Don't worry. This wasn't beyond our expectations."

"Eh, are you serious?"

"Yeah, you'll know what I mean soon."

After Kikyou and I reached the exit, I slightly opened the shutter and saw two people waiting outside.

"Chabashira-sensei... and Horikita-senpai?" Of course, Kikyou was surprised to see them.

"Ayanokouji, what happened to her?" Chabashira-sensei asked with a worried expression.

I turned to Kikyou, leaving it up to her whether she wanted a teacher to know what happened. She returned my gaze before turning back to Chabashira-sensei.

"Nothing happened."

"What?"

"It's alright, Sensei. Nothing happened... But I'm really tired, so please take me to the infirmary."

Of course, Chabashira-sensei understood what Kikyou wanted to say, so she could do nothing but sigh.

"Alright, come with me."

"Sensei, wait a minute. The message should be posted any second now. Please be ready."

"What message...?" asked Kikyou.

"Ayanokouji anticipated that this might happen, so we've taken some measures."

Before Chabashira-sensei could continue her explanation, her phone suddenly made a sound. Another post was made and put up on Class 1-A's forum page. The moment Chabashira-sensei saw the first sentence, she promptly sent a message to our associates outside. Kikyou looked at her own phone and saw the message.

[My name is Horikita Suzune of Class 1-A, and I'm a former student of Sakuragaoka Academy along with Kushida Kikyou-san. I'm making this post to inform everyone that the contents of the news article from Sakuragaoka Academy's official website are fake. Firstly, I am absolutely sure that no such news was published on the date written in the article. Secondly, the events depicted in it did not happen in our school. Thirdly, even on the off-chance that the accusations were real, they are not at all connected to Kushida Kikyou-san. The ones who spread the link probably just wanted to slander Kushida-san for whatever reason. And since these types of mishaps had happened before during my time as a student of Sakuragaoka, I know that they'll replace

the news article with an apology a few minutes after they take down the page. That is all.]

"Horikita-san...? Did you do this, Kiyotaka-kun?" As expected, Kikyō was dumbfounded.

"I just asked her for a favor," I shrugged.

"The apology will be posted shortly. That should exonerate you from most of the fire," Chabashira-sensei explained. "Let's go now. You should rest as soon as possible. I know a path where we shouldn't be seen by anyone."

"W-What about you, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"I'll be here for a while to finish a couple of things. Let's talk tomorrow, Kikyō." I can't just leave more than a dozen unconscious bodies lying around here, can I?

"Eh, but... Okay..." Her emotions were all over the place. On the one hand, she was confused by all the sudden developments. On the other, her body and mind were just too worn out for the day.

After they left, the older Horikita made an exasperated sigh.

"I thought I said you shouldn't involve me in something objectionable," he said.

"You're not involved. You were simply hanging around the area before coincidentally stumbling upon some Class 1-D students walking away from here."

He turned around before giving me a side-eye.

"It seems like your plan was very elaborate, even involving the outside. This goes beyond what a student can do."

"Do you want to know how I did it?"

"No, I said I won't pry. However, I want to know if you're willing to use similar methods in dealing with Nagumo."

"I'm not sure. Probably not."

"I see. That's all for now. Don't worry, I'll properly do my role."

I went back inside the warehouse and felt my phone buzz. As expected, the news article page, where the original link sent those who clicked or tapped on it, has been transformed. The only content in it is a heartfelt apology from the school.

Some people might doubt the timing of everything, but the apology post addressed the help of ANHS's staff for swiftly informing them of the post (that has been up for weeks now) because one of their students was wrongfully slandered by it.

Meanwhile, Horikita's post became a hot topic. After the apology was posted on the website, the credibility of her words skyrocketed, and most students believed them to be the truth. A lot of questions were being asked of her, but she answered them flawlessly so I didn't have to worry about anything.

After putting my phone away, I gently slapped Sonoda's cheeks to

wake him up.

"Ow..." He held his jaw in pain.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I thought I was dead, man. You really didn't waste any time."

"Well, you asked for it."

"Yeah..." Sonoda looked around and saw everyone else. "H-Holy shit... You really beat everyone, even Albert, and you're not even injured... And Ryuuen looks messed up. I guess that serves him right."

"I hope he calms down after this. He's too belligerent."

"You said it... But where's Kushida?"

"I had someone take her. No need to worry."

"I see... Should we wake everyone else up?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

Sonoda decided to help me, and we managed to whip everyone back up to being conscious.

The first ones to get knocked out were extremely surprised when they woke up. They couldn't believe that all thirteen of them lost to one person.

"Are you fucking serious...?" asked Aragaki.

"Yeah... Don't do anything stupid. You don't stand a chance," said Ishizaki.

"Albert... Ibuki... Did you guys seriously lose?" asked Demura.

Ibuki ignored him, but Albert nodded honestly while holding his abdomen.

Nagaoka and Sakazaki sat as far away as possible from me. Rakuyama and the others were trying to talk to them, but they wouldn't speak.

Everyone was especially shocked to see the state Ryuuen was in.

I handled him myself for a one-on-one talk.

"Tch..."

"Hey, you're finally awake."

"Do you think... this is over, Ayanokouji...?"

"It's over." No matter how you looked at it, this fight had been decided. "I don't think you can keep going even if you wanted to."

"I don't care... I'll use any means necessary... to win," Ryuuen said, slowly lifting his body up from the ground. "Even it means... all-out war."

"Are you going to report me to the school?"

"Heh, that would be really, really lame... but it is an option. Wouldn't it be nice if I made it look like you set a trap for us?"

"I guess you could try, but how would I even trap thirteen students alone? Even if you have some sort of alibi, I can easily counter that with my own. And don't forget, you were involved in

stocking up weapons in here. Unless you could keep every single detail about that hidden from an investigation, you'll be deemed as the culprit at the very end."

"You seriously think I'm just gonna lay down and accept defeat?"

"You should. I knew you wouldn't stop attacking me until I struck you at least once. I also knew you'd target Kikyou because she was close to me. That's why I managed to engineer this whole situation right after the Deserted Island Exam."

"So I was just your puppet, huh? I got played like everyone during the Zodiac Exam."

"I tried to warn you about what I'm capable of ever since the Zodiac Exam. I showed you how far I can plan, and how fast I can turn the situation in my favor, but you still didn't stop. That's why I decided to completely crush you instead. You should've gone after the other leaders before facing me. Your chances might've been a little bit better. Thinking that you're the only one who can win with violence was your undoing. You overplayed your hand."

"You sure are direct." Ryuen wore a bitter smile.

"I'd like to say I'd be happy to have a rematch, but I already stepped down from being a leader. Target someone else."

I'd expected him to lash out, but Ryuen silently contemplated my words.

"You guys. Get your asses out of here. Be mindful of your timing," he ordered.

Demura and the others left first. However, Sonoda came back with a slightly panicked expression.

"Ryuen, there's a guy nearby. I think it's a third-year."

"If he's not doing anything, then just ignore him and keep walking." Ryuen sent Sonoda away before glaring at me. "Ayanokouji... You deliberately had a witness keep his distance. You're keeping that card to use against us in the future, aren't you?"

"I'd like to avoid doing so, but yes."

"If that happened, I wouldn't be the only one going down. Everyone in here would be in trouble, huh?"

It's a card that expires when the third-years graduate though. The former student council president is just another one of my insurances. As long as he's around, Ryuen would have no way to turn the tables on me. If push comes to shove, this incident will come to light. However, our side wouldn't suffer because Ryuen doesn't know Kikyou's true past. At worst, everyone will know that I physically fought his group.

"You were too confident about using Kikyou's past. But I guess you wouldn't have known that I could beat you even with a large-scale attack."

"So we're in deep shit now-- is what you're saying."

"Not necessarily. As long as you stop attacking me or Kikyuu, I won't use this incident for any purpose."

"I'm not naïve enough to take you at your word. Our class has its own way of doing things, and that's bound to clash with you at some point. Once that happens, you'll report what happened today to the school. Am I right?"

"Maybe," I replied ambiguously.

It's true that I can't promise him anything. Who knew if Class D was even capable of functioning normally if they were forced to keep their heads down?

"What's your plan then? It's not like you can undo what just happened."

"Shut up. My fight with you is finished. My own battle's over too."

Ryuuen looked at the remaining people inside. They were Ibuki, Albert, and Ishizaki. He took out his phone and did something. He tossed his phone to Ibuki who barely managed to catch it in surprise.

"What are you doing?" She quietly listened to our conversation, so she probably sensed what Ryuuen wanted to do.

"I take responsibility for everything," Ryuuen replied. "Before I do, I'm transferring all my points to you."

"Huh? Are you nuts? Why in the world would you do that?"

"Y-Yeah, Ryuuen-san! It's not like anyone's gonna blab about this. We all came to terms with it while you and Ayanokouji were talking. If we let anything slip, we'd just be shooting our own feet. You don't have to take responsibility!" cried Ishizaki.

Neither side would want to talk about this publicly, but Kikyuu and I have an overwhelmingly advantageous position. Ryuuen realized that, so he thought of the only way to cut his losses.

"Ayanokouji, I'm the sole perpetrator of this incident. My expulsion should be enough, don't you think?"

"That sounds serious-- taking responsibility and all."

"Don't be dumb," Ryuuen snapped, spitting some blood from his mouth. "A tyrant can only reign as long as his power holds meaning. If I've lost after coming this far, no one's gonna follow me anymore."

Class D had permitted his tyrannical behavior because he produced results. But if he lost, he's no longer qualified to rule. Ryuuen knew that right even before he took his position. I really made the right decision in letting him go on a rampage.

"Stop screwing around! Why would you entrust your points to me?!" Ibuki questioned him.

"Because you hate me. Divide the remaining points among

everyone. Once the school expels me, I bet Katsuragi and Sakayanagi will void our contract. I don't think you could do anything about that," he replied.

It was certainly possible as long as the person named in the contract dropped out of school.

"Ryuuen-san, are you serious about this?!" Ishizaki exclaimed in distress.

"Shut it. No need to shout. I can hear you just fine," Ryuuen chuckled. "I'll leave the rest to you. Later."

Seems like he's made up his mind. He stood up and walked out of the open shutter, deaf to both Ibuki and Ishizaki's words.

"Are you sure? I think you'll come to regret this," I said, stopping him in his tracks.

"Heh, why do you care?"

"If you leave without knowing why you lost, you won't grow," I replied.

"Huh?"

"Are you really fine with not knowing why you lost to me?" It was something that Ryuuen was clearly curious about.

"Let it go. There's no point in trying to save me. You've got nothing to gain by sparing me now that I know about you. Even if I don't know about Kikyou's true past, I could still expose your true abilities to those who *may* want to know."

"Who might that be?"

"You don't have to play dumb. The third-year witness that you got should be Horikita's older brother. I don't know what you guys are cooking up, but I'm sure it's against the current student council president. I know you're keeping your identity from him by hiding behind Suzune."

It's just as I expected. Both Ryuuen and Sakayanagi already know that I'm somehow connected to Nagumo. It's good that I can confirm that now.

"It's certainly inconvenient, but that's all. I'm not hiding from him because I'd be at a disadvantage. I can go against him even if I'm out in the open. I wanted to stay hidden simply because of preference. You should understand better than anyone that it doesn't matter whether he knows me or not."

"Heh, I guess that's true."

"If I must name a reason for sparing you, I guess having you crush Ichinose and Sakayanagi for us is a nice advantage. Since your contract with Katsuragi will remain, Class B will continue losing a portion of their private points. And more importantly, people will start to wonder why you suddenly dropped out. Some unwanted individuals might start snooping around. It's all for my own

benefit," I explained. "Even if word of what happened here gets out, I took no noticeable injuries. It would just look like you guys fought among yourselves, right?"

Ryuuen made a snort, ignoring my words.

"This is what happened here," he turned to Ibuki. "I tried to punish all of you for your failings, but you turned the tables and beat me up instead. After that, I was forced to drop out."

"Are you... Are you really okay with that?" she asked.

"You're free to drop out, but I have no intention of telling anyone about today unless you force my hand, and the former student council president promised to keep things under the rug unless I say otherwise," I added. "That said, you're also free to doubt me. Even if nothing about this situation is forcing you to withdraw, I won't stop you if you still want to."

"Then don't stop me. I don't trust you," he snapped back.

With those words, he continued walking away and vanished from sight. Ishizaki and Ibuki looked like they didn't agree with his decision-- not in the slightest.

Vol. 7: Chapter 11.1 - Hostage

That night, I dreamed about my childhood-- about that time I killed a snake. If I grabbed it and taught it to feel fear before killing it, would I still have slaughtered it in the end?

"Freakin' stupid."

That line of thought was pointless. You only got one life, and it didn't have an undo button. Some days, you won, and some days you lost. Yesterday just happened to be the latter. The number of times I'd been beaten was probably in the triple digits by now. Heck, yesterday hadn't even been the first time I'd lost to him-- to Ayanokouji.

So, what made this different from everything that'd happened so far?

At eight o'clock the next morning, I left the dorms and made my way to the school building. Although this was the first day of our winter vacation, club activities were still being held, so the building had been left open. School rules required uniforms to be worn within the building, but I didn't need to pay attention to that particular rule anymore-- or any rules, for that matter.

The clubs were already engaged in their morning practice which generally started around seven. Since Keyaki Mall didn't open until ten, I was probably the only student heading toward the school building now.

"Achoo...!"

Along the way, I encountered a lone student standing by the side of the path, trembling from the cold. I ignored her and kept going, but she called out to me.

"You finally came."

I just kept walking.

"Hey, wait a minute!" she yelled, chasing me in a panic before grabbing my shoulder.

"What are you doing? Don't touch me like that," I snarled.

"I don't exactly *want* to touch you. You dumped your phone on me, remember? I'm just giving it back," said a red-nosed Ibuki.

She thrust my phone back at me.

"You could've done this at a better time. How long have you been waiting?" I asked.

"Who knows?"

So she'd waited for quite a while, huh? She's unnecessarily sensitive when it comes to pointless things like this. I didn't take the phone, but Ibuki grabbed my arm when I tried to slip past her.

"Don't quit," she suddenly said.

"I knew it. You didn't just come here to return my phone."

"Do you remember what you said back when you fought Ishizaki and Albert? You said that the strongest person is whoever wins in the end, no matter how many times they lost before. That's exactly how it went when you fought them." She glared at me, but it wasn't just filled with hate.

"So what?"

"Are you really going to end this after losing to Ayanokouji yesterday?"

"You've been with me ever since we started waging war on other classes. You saw how Ayanokouji outsmarted me when I tried to set Yamauchi and Ike up. Then, he figured out our plan during the Deserted Island Exam. He also screwed over my schemes for the Zodiac Exam by figuring out the pattern on the first day. After that, he used me as an accomplice for his own plans. Heck, he even predicted the expulsion of his classmates and saved one of them just to send a message," I elaborated. "I used my last and strongest card yesterday, Ibuki. And even with that, I still lost."

"My question is the same. Are you really going to end this because you lost?"

"You were already fast asleep during the height of the fight. If you saw how Ayanokouji dismantled Albert and the others even after they swarmed him, you won't have the guts to even ask me that question."

"But *you* saw it!" She raised her voice. "You saw how he did it... And you still fought him until the very end! If you can do that, then why can't you continue fighting?"

"There's no point in what you're saying. I couldn't care less anymore."

"I didn't know you were this lame." If you're gonna say something like that, at least mean it. Don't make such a miserable face.

But... it's true that I didn't care anymore. 'Guess he was a big deal after all... if he could make me feel this way.

"Hm," I simply shrugged with complete indifference.

"Don't give me that!" Ibuki huffed, refusing to let go of my arm.

"You wanted me to get kicked out of this place, didn't you? Why are you suddenly against it?"

"I cooperated with you because you said you'd get us to Class A. Now you're just going to leave us high and dry?"

Ibuki had her frequent outbursts, but it seemed like this one had been building for a long time now. She had more to get off her chest, showing no sign of stopping.

"I tolerated your tyranny. I put up with it because we had the same ultimate goal. Even when we got our class points docked the other day, and you wouldn't tell us why, no one complained. We all believed you'd get us to Class A someday. And now... you're just going to drop out? That's lame-- so lame." She took a breath before continuing. "Is there anything more pathetic?" (1)

"You're really gonna spin this however's most convenient for you, huh?" I asked.

I moved carefully as I stopped walking. Any unnecessary movements would make my body hurt all over.

"Yeah, I told you good-for-nothings that if you followed me, I'd get you to Class A. That was just me dangling a carrot before your noses while I used violence to sow the seeds of fear. You do know about my contract with Class B, don't you? That was all for me-- just me. I couldn't give a shit about the rest of you."

"So you're saying that you planned to make it to Class A alone?"

"That's right. There's no way I'd try to take you lot with me. Shouldn't that be obvious?" Even she would be convinced if I said this much.

"Then what about this?" Ibuki turned the screen towards me. It showed the three-year-long strategy I'd been working on.

"What?"

"Eight hundred million private points... If you were trying to make it to Class A alone, twenty million private points would've been enough. So why come up with a strategy that includes the number of points necessary to get all of Class D up to Class A?" she asked. "Though I can't imagine how we'd ever save up that many points..."

"Quit dreaming. I was only messing around when I wrote that." I snatched my phone back. "Hiyori and Kaneda will probably lead Class D from here on out. As long as Ayanokouji doesn't make any moves, it's still possible for you to gain enough class points and catch up. Hiyori and Ayanokouji have a chummy relationship, so maybe you can take advantage of that by playing friends for a while."

"Hahhh... Fine. I'll agree on one condition."

Ugh, this stupid woman. She still hadn't transferred any of my private points at all. What a pain.

"What do you want?"

"If you're going to drop out, then win against me in a fight," she declared.

What an absolutely crazy suggestion. Idiots make good pawns, but the downside was that they ran wild every so often like this.

"Hey, now. Aren't you the lame one here? You got off easy yesterday, but Ayanokouji gave me a thorough beating. How can you challenge me with a straight face?" I spoke while grabbing onto the arm that held mine.

Thwack

But before I could make any moves, Ibuki unleashed a powerful kick that sent me flying. I couldn't move my muscles properly, so I landed hard on the pavement.

"Ow, damn it. I can't even take a fall," I groaned.

"Ah, that felt great. Well, if you're going to quit, hurry up and do it," she shot back at me.

Ibuki turned around and started walking back to the dorms. I *really* wondered just how long she'd been waiting for me.

Upon reaching the school, I paid a visit to my homeroom teacher. I'd called ahead and made an appointment through the dorm's landline which was very convenient. I was doing this the very next day to forestall the complications of the whole mess in that warehouse as much as I could, especially considering I'd tampered with a security camera on the rooftop to create an alibi. The former student council president also knew about what had happened. I had to move fast.

"I gotta talk to you about the thing I reported yesterday, Sensei."

He came out of the faculty room after I knocked.

"I understand," Sakagami-sensei replied. "Please accompany me to the counselor's office."

"Sure."

"But first, there's something we must address."

"What?"

"Would you step outside, please?" Sakagami-sensei called to someone in the faculty room.

"Ryuuen-san..."

Ishizaki and Albert emerged to join us in the hallway. First, it was that idiot Ibuki, and now them? Why the hell are they here?

"They've been waiting since early this morning, wondering whether you'd come by. Even when I told them to contact you directly, they wouldn't listen. It's quite troublesome, so before we have our meeting, I need you to do something about these two," he

said.

"What are you guys even doing here? Beat it, or I'll kill you." I glared at Ishizaki.

"We-"

"Um..."

"About the surveillance camera being destroyed-- did these two have anything to do with it?" Sakagami-sensei asked, adjusting his glasses.

"I did that by myself. Ignore them and let's just get on with it."

The two of them might say something careless, so I shook them off and started walking to the counselor's office. Sakagami-sensei probably suspected that something was up, but he told them to head back before following me.

"I have a general idea of what happened based on what you said over the phone, but walk me through this once more so we're clear. First of all, you admit to defacing the security camera by spray-painting the lens, correct?"

"Yeah, I did that on my own."

"I see. Then, is it true that a fight broke out between you, Ishizaki, Albert, Ibuki, and some other class members?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's true. I take complete responsibility for it. I threw the first punch and they just retaliated."

"Well then, this will be quick."

"Please wait, Ryuen-san! We did have something to do with-"

I kicked Ishizaki who followed us without thinking. Doing something like this in front of a teacher shouldn't matter at this point. But for fuck's sake, this idiot...

"How many times do you plan on making me say it? Did the beating I gave you yesterday not satisfy you?" I spat at Ishizaki, who crouched on the floor in pain.

"Ryuen, what are you doing?!" Sakagami-sensei rebuked my behavior.

I ignored him and continued walking. The door was just a couple of steps away, so I went inside the counselor's office while Sakagami-sensei followed. Ishizaki and Albert were probably left outside.

"You can add that outburst just now to whatever my penalty is," I said.

"It seems there's a misunderstanding here, so allow me to offer some corrections," he replied. "We've confirmed that there are inconsistencies in your statement."

"Huh? Hold up. What do you mean by inconsistencies?"

"Based on my understanding, there's been some kind of problem between you and Class A."

What the hell? Did Ayanokouji do something again? Depending on what he'd reported, the others would get punished as well.

"What kind of problem?" I asked.

"From what I've heard, a student from Class A was also involved in destroying the security camera. They'd already paid for the reparation costs. What I wanted to confirm with you was whether you wished to split the blame, and by extension, the fine."

"You've gotta be shitting me."

What a cheap way to prevent me from dropping out. You seriously don't think this will work, do you?

"I'm dropping out," I said with a severe tone.

"The problem isn't big enough for you to worry about expulsion. Do you still want to drop out despite that?" Sakagami-sensei wasn't a fool. He must've sensed that something other than what happened on the rooftop had gone down yesterday.

"That's right. I see no point in staying in this school any longer."

"I see. If that's your final decision, I can't stop you," he sighed, pulling out a form. "Please fill this out."

"Alright. Gimme a sec."

Before I could pick up a pen, he pulled out two more forms.

"Once you're done, please deliver these to Ishizaki and Yamada."

"What? They've got nothing to do with this."

"You're certainly right, but this was their wish. They said that they would also quit school should you choose to drop out. The two of them wouldn't listen to reason."

I see... That bastard must've put this nonsensical idea in their heads. He's basically holding Ishizaki and Albert hostage to prevent me from withdrawing. If those two dropped out with me, then it's all meaningless. We'd also lose 900 class points in an instant which would royally suck for those left behind.

"Shit."

"Personally, I would find it rather regrettable for anyone in my class to drop out." Sakagami-sensei gazed down at the withdrawal form in my hand. "Ishizaki and the others strongly attested that no violent event had taken place, saying that their injuries were simply caused by friendly fights that got overly physical. I know that's likely not the case, but it's the testament of the people whom you named as the victims. If they don't file a complaint, your fight will be ignored, and the matter can be resolved with a simple fine for damaging school property. This is your first and last chance."

"What's the point of me even staying though...?" I muttered to myself.

I had no cards left to play. Should I start over from scratch? I guess I'd have to think about this on my own.

"Fine, I won't drop out." I handed the paper and pen back to Sakagami-sensei and left.

Author's Notes:

1. An additional deduction of 100 class points was taken from Ryuen's class during this time. The details of this mysterious incident weren't revealed, but whatever it was, it happened before the fight against Kiyotaka.

Vol. 7: Chapter 12.1 - This Is Who I Am

December 23rd, Thursday. 4:56 PM.

I walked along a path laden with trees and covered in snow as the cold winds of winter brushed past my skin. My footprints stained the calming appearance of the flush, even ground. It's funny to think that this place was filled with colors last night. In a span of one snowy night, it has become a scenery of white.

There, I saw the figure of a girl. She was wearing a warm-looking fleece jacket along with an eye-catching cotton skirt.

It was none other than Class 1-A's masked angel, Kushida Kikyou-- the first friend I made in this school.

"Hey, Kiyotaka-kun." She greeted me with a radiant smile on her pretty face.

"You should've kept resting inside your room," I said as I stopped walking.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'll be okay. Ryuuko-chan took care of me the entire night..." Kikyou replied with a look of reminiscence. "I still needed to put a cold compress on my cheek though, and some parts of my gums are wounded."

She playfully tapped the cold compress, showcasing her usual demeanor like nothing happened.

"Did anyone bother you about the rumors?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say that. But I received tons of messages of concern. I told everyone it didn't matter whether the news article was true or not since no name was mentioned in it, but I swore that it wasn't connected to me in any way. I matched my statement with Horikita-san's words, so now, I can safely say that everyone believes us," she explained. "And besides, everyone already had a feeling that Ryuuen-kun was behind all of it. If I had to worry about something, it's the fact that Sakuragaoka Academy had become the talk of the school."

"I see. I guess that makes sense," I commented before asking another question. "How did it go with Ryuuko? You told her everything, didn't you?"

I expected Kikyou to flinch or tense up, but it seemed like she expected that question.

"Yes... I was scared-- really scared," Kikyou sighed. "But... Ryuuko-chan accepted me. She promised to be my friend no matter

what as long as I genuinely see her as one."

"I'm happy for you."

"Mn," she nodded. "Once I get the opportunity, I'll tell Mii-chan and Kokoro-chan as well."

With that, our talk had basically ended. A brief second of silence was all it took for the atmosphere to change. I looked at the unmasked Kikyuu. She was ready for whatever comes next.

"So, why did you call me here?" I asked.

"I just... wanted to tell you something that I've been wishing to say for a long time now, Kiyotaka-kun."

I stayed silent and waited for her to continue. Along with Karuizawa Kei, she was the one who taught me about the intricacies of social cues, especially with girls. That's why I knew what she was about to say.

Kikyuu was a few meters away from me, but I could clearly see the unfeigned expression on her face. The cold breeze made her growing hair sway, but it didn't diminish her charming appearance in the slightest. And with an innocent smile forming on her lips...

"I love you."

Kikyuu uttered those words with a familiar look in her eyes. It wasn't the fake and sweet twinkle that she would show everyone, but a genuine and raw gaze that only I could ever witness. The real Kushida Kikyuu had confessed her feelings for me.

"If I told you that I felt the same way, are you willing to be in a relationship with me?"

"Yes... I want to be your girlfriend, and I want you to be my boyfriend. I want everyone to know that we're dating. I want to hold hands, and I want to go on dates. I want to do everything for real this time."

The resolve in her eyes indicated a strong desire for change.

"Kikyuu, I don't think you understand what you're getting into."

"I do understand," she insisted.

"You don't," I replied, shaking my head. "I'll tell you what I mean."

"What...?"

I slowly walked towards Kikyuu. She laid herself bare, so doing this shouldn't be too cruel. I also wanted to show her something real.

"Ever since I met you in school, I thought of you as nothing but a useful person-- someone who could help me socialize and make friends. That didn't really change even after we got close. I'd always planned on using you as bait against Ryuuken ever since the Deserted Island Exam. In fact, I manipulated Ryuuken and Ibuki so

they'd double down on targeting you. It's true that I didn't expect Ryuuen to go as far as he did, but it's also true that I expected you to get tormented by him to some degree." I narrated my thoughts before handing over a mini ziplock bag with two SD cards inside. "I used two other hidden bugs to record our conversation that night. That was my real contingency plan. I would use it without hesitation the moment you become a threat. And if you betray the class, I won't hesitate to expel you myself. You never trusted me, but I never trusted you either."

"..."

"Even now, the reason why I helped you grow was so I can further use you and your abilities. This is who I am, Kikyou. *This* is what you're getting into."

Kikyou silently stared at me with her trembling fists clenched. However, I didn't know how to describe her feelings just by looking at her face.

Sometime during winter break, Sakuragaoka Academy, the name of Kushida Kikyou's middle school, was seemingly forgotten by everyone in ANHS all of a sudden. Two rumors popped up, dominating the scene, and drowning the previous one. The first rumor was relatively small as it was only talked about by the first-years. It was about Class 1-D's leader, Ryuuen Kakeru, who'd apparently stepped down from his position.

The second one, meanwhile, sent waves across the entire student body. *Everyone* was talking about it.

"Hey, hey, is it true?" asked a girl from Class 2-C.

"Yeah, it is..." answered, another girl, her classmate.

"Seriously? *That* Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Yeah, him. No kidding."

"Wow... I remember them being close friends. A lot of the guys were really jealous of him too."

"I mean, who wouldn't? I *did* think he was cute before, and I saw how cool he can be during the sports festival."

"For real. Even some of the third-year girls developed a crush on him."

"So... they're not even friends now?"

"Yep, I heard they stopped talking to each other."

"Wow... Who would've thought? Something must've gone wrong."

"I know right? That was really unexpected."

"I can't believe Ayanokouji-kun confessed his feelings and got rejected by Kushida-chan."

Author's Notes:

This is the last chapter of Volume 7. Thank you for reading.

CotE: Alter Omake - Solace Edition

I. Teachings of an Expert [1]

October 6th, Wednesday.

Inside Room 401, Kikyou settled down on my bed while I sat on my office chair.

"Oh, right. You never told me about Ichihashi-san's confession."

"What?"

"Ah, it just came to my mind all of a sudden, so I thought I'd ask."

"Oh, okay. How did you know she confessed?"

"Are you really asking *me* that?" Kikyou responded with a smug smirk.

Of course. Of course, she knew. This is Kikyou we're talking about.

I sighed and began telling her the story. If she was already aware of it, then I guess going into details wouldn't do any harm. It's better to just satisfy this secret-obsessed girl.

"Hmm... So you didn't look surprised. That's anything not new," she commented.

"Uh-huh..."

"But you really like saying *"I don't want to be in a relationship right now."* huh?"

"Is... there a problem with that?" For some reason, I started getting nervous.

"That's a very girly line, you know?"

"Is it?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with you saying it, I guess... Still, you don't talk a lot, but you also tend to say too much sometimes. You don't have to say anything unless the girl asks for a reason, or if the situation calls for it."

"I see... I'll keep that in mind."

"And you're not even telling the truth. I know you want a girlfriend~." She crossed her arms with a smile.

"You sound so sure."

"Of course. I'm your best friend, after all." She puffed her bountiful chest outwards. "Hey, where are you looking, you pervert~?"

"I know you did it on purpose, so I thought I'd hurt your feelings if I didn't react."

"You're an idiot." Kikyou barraged me with soft playful blows.

Feeling satisfied, she suddenly started laughing.

"And at the end, you even asked her to eat dinner with you. Kiyotaka-kun, you really are an idiot sometimes."

"I blame my ignorance. I felt really bad about it."

I took Ichihashi's composure for granted. I'll make sure not to do that again.

"Mature girls are good at acting tough, but don't be fooled. They're still hurt inside when they get rejected."

"What should I do in that situation?"

"Just listen to them. After they pour their heart out, make sure to let them know you listened. Honestly tell them that you don't feel the same way-- that all you can give them is friendship." Kikyou advised me with a reminiscent smile.

She must've been confessed to by guys that she didn't think badly of. Her uncharacteristically gentle expression says it all.

"I see... I guess I still lack some tact when it comes to this."

"That's fine. If they're an amazing person, you can even make self-deprecating jokes about not deserving their confession. It can lighten up the mood, but it'll depend on how close you are. And if the girl is a shy one, be sure to compliment their courage first."

"I understand. That actually makes a lot of sense. Thanks for the advice."

"Hmph, you can count on me anytime."

Kikyou was a seasoned veteran when it came to getting confessions. I'm lucky to receive the teachings of an expert.

I started to wonder about what she'd do if *she* was the one doing the confession.

II. A Normal Day in Class A

October 18th, Monday.

My name is Ueno Itsuki, and frankly, I just wanna sleep. It was the start of another long week, but my body was already starting to crave rest.

"Hey, Itsuki. We're going to the cafeteria. Are you coming or not?" Kazuto called out to me.

"Mmm..."

I'm not sick, but as usual, my head feels heavy. I think it's just a simple case of sleepiness. Ahh, I don't want to move my head anymore. It feels like my face and the surface of this table are meant to be together.

"Woah-" I suddenly felt my whole body float up in the air.

My waist was grabbed by an arm, but I wasn't too surprised. It was just Setsu trying to carry me like he always does.

"I'm sure you skipped breakfast again. If you don't eat lunch, you'll get too hungry and collapse," he said.

"Ohh... I guess you're right. Thanks, Setsu."

"It's nothing. Carrying you is no big deal when you're this light."

"Hey, even if I'm like this, I still weigh 46 kilograms." I retaliated with a lazy tone.

"And that's dangerously light for a guy in his first year of high school!" He was probably right.

"Well, you're a very big guy, so I don't think you'd find me heavy even if I weigh a little more."

"Maybe," he huffed proudly.

He walked out of the classroom, carrying me like a simple baggage.

"You're on your exclusive ride to the cafeteria again, Itsuki. How nice," said Kazuto. "Hey, Setsu. Carry me too, will ya?"

"Walk on your own. We're already gathering too much attention."

I looked around, and lots of students were giving us curious glances... as usual. I sighed internally and ignored them.

After we got to the cafeteria, I stayed in my seat while Setsu and Kazuto got our orders.

"I should've just gotten a bento so I wouldn't have to go here," I muttered to myself.

The classroom wasn't quiet during class, but it was a thousand times better than the bustling cafeteria. I waited absent-mindedly until the two got back. A couple of minutes later, we ate our food and chatted like we usually do.

"Oh, Yanai-senpai is singing again. Lucky," said Kazuto.

After a short introduction, Yanai-senpai's voice was suddenly heard from the speakers.

Her voice was easily recognized by everyone. She was treated like a diva which was well-deserved given how good she was at singing. According to what I know, she'd sing some songs during lunch break whenever someone requested it to the student council. Yanai-senpai must really like singing since she'd agreed to it a number of times whenever she was free. This year, she didn't do any singing during the first semester, but she accepted requests again sometime after the sports festival. Now, she'd gained a lot of new fans from the first-years.

"You really like girls with great singing voices, huh?" I commented.

"W-What?"

"What do you mean *'what'*? Nishimura is a great singer, isn't she?"

"Shh, don't raise your voice too much, Itsuki. What if someone hears you?!"

"No one would give a damn about our conversation right now, and none of our classmates are here. Don't be so paranoid," I sighed exasperatedly.

"Hah, I knew you had a crush on Nishimura. You looked so sad when our new tutoring groups got announced," Setsu smirked.

"S-So what? Everyone can have a bit of a crush on someone. I mean, you have a huge crush on Kushida, right?"

"Stop being defensive, dude. I'm not saying you can't have a crush on her," sighed Setsu. "Still, we have it rough, don't we? Nishimura and Kushida probably have a crush on Ayanokouji, so there's no hope for us."

"Ah, you noticed that too? I mean, even our classmates are rooting for either one of them, especially Kushida..."

Setsu and Kazuto looked deflated.

"Don't sour the mood. I'm still eating here, you know?" I don't really care about crushes-- at least not right now. I'm too focused on finishing the games I bought.

The two of them laughed at my words and continued their meal.

Well, if they're up against Ayanokouji, then it's just a matter of who he'd choose. Though I wonder if he even cares about girls. Ayanokouji is popular, but I feel like he prioritizes his hobbies as an otaku... A popular ikemen otaku... That's an anomaly, alright. Never thought I'd encounter such a person in my lifetime.

When we finished, I decided to walk on my own on the way back. But yes, Setsu carrying me was still an option.

The moment I got back, I was instantly approached by Okitani and Onizuka.

"P-Please, Ueno, can we borrow your skills later again? We really wanna try this new song!"

"Uhh... Sure, I guess."

"Alright!" They celebrated in glee.

Okitani and Onizuka are average students like me. We don't really excel in academics or sports just like most of our classmates here in Class A, but we're pretty skilled when it comes to our hobbies. These two, in particular, are very good at music, specifically, the guitar. Okitani is both passionate and talented while Onizuka is competent and experienced. They haven't formed a band just yet, but they're definitely skilled enough to be in one.

Oh, me? I play bass. I may be lazy, but I don't turn down their requests because I'm also quite fond of playing some music. The bass is heavy though, so I usually play while sitting. For the drums, Kazuto is always down to go as long as I go, so those two usually

ask me first.

"Ahh, peace..." I've once again reunited with my beloved seat.

There's still some time before lunch break ends, so I usually observe everyone in the classroom until my eyes tire out.

Ayanokouji was taking a nap while Miyake and Sudou were chatting near him. Surprisingly, Kushida was also taking a nap while her friends surrounded her. She was already sleeping right after lunch started. Is she gonna be okay?

Meanwhile, Karuizawa and her friends were showing each other something on their phones. Matsushita was chatting with Shinohara and Maezono, while Mori was laughing about something with Satou.

Hirata was talking to Yokoyama and Yukimura about something, which may be related to the Paper Shuffle or the short quiz tomorrow. And the rest... Well, they're probably just doing their own thing. I'll just take a nap now.

"Huh-?!" Out of nowhere, Kushida yelped herself awake.

"K-Kikyou-chan? Are you alright? You suddenly fell asleep when the break started and now this... Did you not get enough rest last night...?" asked Nishimura.

"Eh? Ah, mn... Yeah, I think I'm just a bit tired..." she replied.

Ayanokouji seemed to have woken up as well. How weird.

Well, it doesn't concern me, so I don't care.

I stretched my arms before relaxing my entire body. Ahh, ignorance really is bliss, especially on this uneventful, normal day.

III. A Normal Day in Class B

October 18th, Monday.

I'm Nishikawa Ryouko of Class 1-B, and just so you know, I'm an excellent student in comparison to most of my classmates. Just so you know, okay?

We were originally Class 1-A, but we got demoted. According to the information we've gathered, our class has the most number of academically accomplished students compared to the other classes. Why did we get brought down to Class B? Well, we still have a handful of average and below-average students, but they weren't the reason why we got demoted. Everyone in our class already knew that a single person was responsible for it, and now, they reign at the top.

Who is this person, you ask? Why, it's none other than the current Class A's Ayanokouji Kiyotaka! His class was the previous Class D, but he single-handedly carried them to Class A. According to

Sakayanagi-san, Class D would've had less than 200 class points after April, but because Ayanokouji-kun did *something*, they ended up with more than 700 class points which instantly boosted them up to Class B in May. We asked Sakayanagi-san what it was that he did, but she insisted that she didn't know. Mashima-sensei wouldn't tell us either, saying that it's not in his authority to answer such a question.

Just... what in the world did he do? Did he know about the S-System from the start and explain everything to his classmates? Where would he get that information then?

Our class, for instance, just behaved like proper students as per Sakayanagi-san and Katsuragi-kun's instructions. Of course, most of us wouldn't have adhered to the words of mere classmates, but Sakayanagi-san instantly made a move to prove her point.

She signed a contract with the whole class.

First, she'd have everyone behave like a model student for the whole month of April except for one of our classmates. The exception, Kamuro-san, was instructed to do things like coming to school late or not paying attention during class discussions. If our allowance doesn't decrease by May, she'd divide all of her private points and offer them to us for the next three years. Everyone was skeptical, but we decided to agree. We wouldn't lose anything from it, after all. Come next month, the amount of private points deposited in our accounts dropped down from 100,000 to 94,000. In other words, Sakayanagi-san's hunch was right, and on May 3rd, Mashima-sensei explained everything to us. Sakayanagi-san may not have known about the S-System, but she knew that *something* was off. She proved herself to be extremely clever, and that was how she gained our trust and solidified herself as one of our class's leaders.

Did Ayanokouji-kun do the same thing as Sakayanagi-san? To be honest, I don't know if I'll ever get an answer to that question.

During the Deserted Island Exam, Ayanokouji-kun's class also dominated us. Without Sakayanagi-san around, Katsuragi-kun was our only leader. He'd implemented a number of strategies, but apparently, they backfired. That's why it was easy for the others to blame him after we lost.

The Zodiac Exam followed soon after. Katsuragi-kun played it safe and insisted we look out for possible traitors, like Hashimoto-kun, whom he accused during the island exam. However, we were also thoroughly defeated in the end. That basically marked the end of Katsuragi-kun's reign as Sakayanagi-san's rival.

During the Zodiac Exam, it was Horikita Suzune-san who led Class B to victory, ensuring their promotion to Class A.

But well, as much as we see Ayanokouji-kun as a threat, he'd

apparently stepped down from his position after the first semester.

However, we can't let our guard down. With the downfall of Katsuragi-kun's faction, Sakayanagi-san had seized total control of our class. Personally, I see this as a good thing. Sakayanagi-san is a capable leader, and we recently won the sports festival because of her strategy. She may be a bit cold, but she helps us win.

Still, individuals like me and Ai-chan want to propel the class forward even more. We follow Sakayanagi-san, but it's not like we're prohibited from moving on our own as long as we don't cause any disruptions.

"Ryouko-chan, your glasses are crooked," Mao-san called out to me.

"A-Ah, you're right. I didn't notice. Thank you..."

"You're really clumsy sometimes, but that's fine since you're so cute. We're going to the cafeteria, by the way. Do you wanna come with us?"

"It's okay. I'll eat with Ai-chan today..."

"Is that so? Okay, then. See you later! Mind your glasses, okay? You might break your third one~!" Mao-san grouped up with her friends and strolled out of the classroom.

There she goes, treating me like a kid again. Sigh... When will the girls in our class stop this? I'm not a middle schooler! I'm better than most of you in academics too! Oh, but I like Mao-san because she's like an older sister... Wait, no! That's the problem!

Urgh, I can't get swept away by the mood. Mao-san, Emi-san, Riko-san, and Shinobu-san-- those iniquitous women! How dare they think of me as a little sister?! Well, I suppose it *does* feel nice when they dote on me... but that's the problem! I'm a more competent student! They should respect me for who I am! But then again, they *are* kind. They also give me lots of compliments when I do well in exams. Maybe they do respect me in that regard... Ugh, I feel conflicted now.

"It's amazing how much your face can change so fast. I wasn't even able to count how many facial expressions you made in the span of a few seconds."

"It's still better than your unchanging doll face, Ai-chan." Was I showing my emotions too easily? I can't believe it.

"Really? I think my face is efficient when talking to other people. I often get called strange, but I interpret that as a good thing in general. It means people don't immediately understand how I think."

"I guess... you have a point."

Ai-chan really is a weird girl. She didn't bother making any friends during the first month, but she suddenly started becoming

more social when Class D became Class B after the first month. According to her, she wouldn't have done anything if our class could stay on top, but the enemy is quite strong. In the end, our class still ended up getting demoted to Class B after the Zodiac Exam. Everything happened too quickly.

"I'm starting to get tired of my own tonkatsu..." Ai-chan sighed as she opened her bento.

"That's strange. You usually cook what you want to eat."

"I bought a little bit more than I thought I wanted, and I don't want to shop for food knowing that I still have some leftover ingredients. This is the last one anyway, so it's all good."

"You're such a perfectionist... Well, we can trade if you want. I made some karaage."

"Oh, really? Thanks, Ryouko."

I sat beside Ai-chan and heard the voices of Motodoi-san's group. They were happily chatting as they ate their bentos. The same could be said for Toba-kun and his friends. The class had been tense ever since we got demoted, but thanks to Sakayanagi-san's recent victory, the atmosphere became much lighter. Everyone believed that our journey back to Class A was only a matter of time under her leadership.

"Now then, as per your request, should we discuss how we're going to approach the person named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?" Ai-chan asked with a serious tone. I would've felt nervous if it weren't for the chewing sounds she made.

"I personally don't want to talk to him. You're better than me in this aspect, Ai-chan."

"Hmm... That's certainly true. I don't think you'd last a minute talking to a guy from another class."

"Hey."

"We'll have to tread carefully though. During the sports festival, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka wasn't as dangerous as before. He was very athletic, but Horikita Suzune was the one who did the strategizing. Sakayanagi Arisu dismantled them as a result. In other words, he's a non-threat. However, that might change if we make the wrong move and provoke him."

"You're right..." I processed her words and went into deep thought.

Morishita Ai. She's a very competent student, but my grades were consistently higher than hers. Even then, her ability to observe others and process information is above that of an ordinary honor student who only thinks about academics.

"If we hold off on making a move, do you think we'll be fine for the upcoming exam?" I asked.

I was confident in getting a high score, but what if an unknown factor came into play?

"The Paper Shuffle Exam is very straightforward. I'm sure we'll win if we just tackle it normally. I've thought about what kind of strategies the other classes could use. Cooperation isn't an option unless another class willingly plans on losing. Our class has the absolute advantage this time. I can only imagine us losing if Sakayanagi Arisu makes a blunder, but I wouldn't count on that."

"We can leave it up to Sakayanagi-san this time as well-- is what you're saying."

"That's right. She already deduced how the short quiz tomorrow will determine our pairings, so I suggest we focus on that."

"I understand. For now, let's just continue gathering information." I thought we could move things forward by directly making contact with Ayanokouji-kun, but I guess now is not the time.

Ai-chan nodded in response as she continued eating. A few seconds later, a familiar voice called out to us.

"Ohh, if it isn't Nishikawa and Morishita. You two have been eating lunch together lately. I'm glad you're getting along." Satonaka-kun approached us with a big smile on his face.

Following behind him were Hashimoto-kun and Tsukasaki-kun. It's the so-called "Ikemen Trio" of Class B. Well, they *are* handsome, and they're super popular with the girls. I can certainly see that. However, it's not a reason to fawn over them like lovestruck idiots every time. I know for a fact that they're aware of their own popularity. I'm sure of it. That's why my stomach churns whenever they act all nice and friendly.

"Ugh..." I groaned reflexively.

"E-Eh...?"

"Ah, sorry, Satonaka-kun. I just felt disturbed all of a sudden."

"Nishikawa really hates you, huh, Satoru?" Hashimoto-kun didn't waste any time and teased him.

"Did you do something to her? That's not cool, dude." Tsukasaki-kun followed suit.

"I don't know..." He innocently scratched his head before turning to me. "Sorry for bothering you, Nishikawa. You too, Morishita. Enjoy your lunch."

They wandered off with their usual smiles. I almost felt guilty for being cold to him, but he recovered as soon as he stopped talking to me. Heh, I *knew* he was acting.

"Satonaka likes you."

"Excuse me?"

"That's how it seemed to me," Ai-chan shrugged.

"You're kidding. *That* guy?"

What is she saying? There's no way that's true.

"At the very least, Satonaka is more interested in you than he is with other girls. Based on my past observations, he's way more careful in dealing with you. Your cold responses might've been a factor, but I think there's more to it than that. Did you have any noteworthy interactions with him in the past?"

"Hmm... I don't know..."

Was it *that* time...? There's no way he'd be interested in me just because of that, right?

"So there's something, huh?"

"H-Hey, wait."

"Don't worry, I won't pry. I don't plan on getting involved with someone else's personal matters."

"You're quite keen on this stuff, Ai-chan."

"I wouldn't say that. I'm merely using simple logic. I've never been in love, so I wouldn't understand the intricacies of emotions and feelings."

I've never been in love either. I don't see a point in it. What good would it bring me anyway?

"Then we're on the same boat. And my logic tells me that Satonaka-kun is just a good-for-nothing."

"That conclusion seems a bit illogical in my opinion."

"It doesn't matter! Let's stop talking about him!"

Ai-chan and I continued eating as we heard Yanai-senpai's beautiful singing voice coming from the speakers around the school, echoing across the hallways.

IV. A Normal Day in Class C

October 18th, Monday.

My name is Kobashi Yume, and I'm a student in Class 1-C. It was the start of another week and our class seemed to be as relaxed as ever. Well, that's only natural. The scariest thing we'd have to worry about would be the Paper Shuffle Exam and the short quiz tomorrow, but Honami-chan and Kanzaki-kun had done a great job figuring things out early on.

"Yume-chan, my hands feel super cold and dry. Can I have some of your moisturizing cream?"

"Oh, sure. Here you go, Chihiro-chan."

"Can I have some too, Yume? Just a little bit."

"You're finally starting to get worried about your skin, aren't you, Mako-chan?"

"Well, it's winter already so..."

We merrily ate our lunch, but we had to pause for some time because Honami-chan was called by the student council. Apparently, she was needed for something, so we decided to wait for her to come back.

After a little while, we heard Yanai-senpai's singing through the speakers.

"Her voice is really great," I said.

"Yeah, Yanai-senpai is amazing."

"I'm back!" Honami-chan opened the door with her usual tornado-like energy.

Maybe she was asked to help them set up Yanai-senpai's performance? The student council and the broadcasting team always work hand-in-hand, so one can ask the other for help if they're lacking in people. Well, it didn't really matter as we continued eating.

"Hey, listen to this! So yesterday..."

Our conversations were the same as usual-- fun and light-hearted. We do have some gossip talks sometimes, but they're usually just for some laughs.

At first, I was sad that I didn't get assigned to Class A, but I'm very happy to be in a class with such friendly people. Now, I wouldn't change anything to be here. I love all of my friends, and all of us are working towards the same goal.

To be able to fight towards Class A while still having a perfectly normal class is a blessing. Our classmates were nice, and everyone was doing their part. With Honami-chan leading us, I know we'd be able to weather any hardships.

"Yume-chan, don't you think he looks great?"

"He does~. I'm starting to want a dog too, but I don't know if my parents will allow me to keep one in our house."

"Dogs are so sweet! But I don't mind cats as well."

"I had a cat when I was little, but she died already."

"Aww, that's so sad. I bet you cried a lot."

"I sure did."

Some of our classmates headed to the cafeteria, like Yui and her friends. Some headed to the convenience store, like Beppu-kun's group. And some stayed in the classroom like us.

In this class, even if conflict is unavoidable sometimes, everyone is trying their best to be friendly and nice to each other. I like how things are going right now, but I wonder if that will ever change.

V. A Normal Day in Class D

October 18th, Monday.

My name's Nishino Takeko of Class 1-D. In this class, every student's worth is decided by their place in the hierarchy. It sucks, but it is what it is, I guess. Personally, it's not a big deal to me since I'm not at the bottom. And even then, being at the bottom just meant that you don't have much influence on the class. It's not as bad as it initially sounds.

Of course, the person at the peak of the hierarchy would be our class leader, Ryuuen. That much was obvious. However, the positions of everyone below him can be unclear at times, to say the least.

In terms of respect, the one on top would probably be Shiina-san. She was kind and intelligent, and she was willing to help anyone in the class. Even the bitchiest girls and the most annoying guys treat her with a considerable amount of politeness, especially because she wasn't afraid of Ryuuen.

Speaking of intelligence, there's Kaneda as well. He and Shiina-san are the smartest students in the class. Following them would be Oda-kun, Suzuki, Wada-san, Nomura-kun, Yoshimoto, Mineshima-san, Sonoda... uh, who else was on the top thirteen...? Well, I guess it didn't really matter. Thirteen academic achievers weren't nearly enough to compete with the higher classes. Even the original Class D surpassed us in terms of exam averages because they were diligently studying in groups.

"Hey, Nanamin, Saki, Rika, let's head to the cafeteria. I'm, like, starving already." Manabe called out to her friends.

"Let's go~!"

"I'm on a diet so I don't wanna eat too much."

Ah, but apart from Kaneda and Shiina-san, none of the so-called "honor students" is above Manabe's group when it comes to clout. Heck, even Ishizaki and his friends don't mess with them without Ryuuen. Those girls also stand at the top of this class's social caste, and Manabe would be the de facto leader of the girls when Ryuuen or Shiina-san aren't around. The only person they probably fear is Ryuuen himself.

"Souta, Takumi, let's go?" Sonoda also called for his friends.

Ugh, I can already imagine how packed the cafeteria will be.

Speaking of which, Sonoda might be on equal grounds with Manabe and her group. He's a popular guy because he's handsome and athletic. He also became friends with Hirata-kun from Class A since they're in the same club. He's pretty decent when it comes to studying as well.

"Sigh... I don't feel hungry at all. Maybe I ate too much breakfast," I muttered to myself.

I wonder what's my place in the hierarchy. As someone who generally wants to avoid trouble, I don't associate myself with Ryuuken-kun's antics unless he needs me. I don't really have friends, so I'm pretty similar to someone like Ibuki.

"Nishino-san? It's already lunch break, you know? Is something bothering you?" A gentle voice rang in my ears.

"Shiina-san? Oh, it's nothing. I just don't feel like eating."

"Huh? You? Stop lying, Nishino." Ishizaki unceremoniously butted in our conversation while eating his melon pan.

Thwack

"Ow, what the hell?! Why'd you hit me?!"

"Shut up, Ishizaki. I'll kick you next time." This guy really is a moron-- a tactless moron.

"You had that coming, Ishizaki-kun. Sorry." See? Even Shiina-san's got my back.

♪ *Itsuka no koe ga ima boku no kokoro wo kyuuukutsu ni shiteiku* ♪

♪ *Aa dattandesho kou dattandesho* ♪

♪ *Migatte kaishaku receiver* ♪

"Oh, it's Yanai-senpai again. That's nice," I said.

"Why don't you sing for the school broadcast sometimes, Hiyori-san? You've got a great singing voice too," suggested Ishizaki.

"Well, that would be a bit embarrassing. I'm not as good as Yanai-senpai, after all."

"Aren't you being too humble? We've heard you sing in karaoke. You're probably just as good as her if not better."

"That's nice of you to say, Nishino-san," she giggled. "But I'll pass since I'd be too shy to even try."

I looked around and sighed internally. Whenever Ryuuken's not around, we look like a completely normal class. Everyone's having fun, talking with their friends while eating lunch.

But at the end of the day, we all have one goal before graduating, and that's advancing to Class A. Our class had the least amount of class points after April, so Ryuuken was already at a disadvantage right after the S-System was revealed. Most of us might've been following Ryuuken out of fear, but we also believe in his abilities. Apart from the current Class A, our class has gained the most points so far.

With the recent announcement of the Paper Shuffle Exam, our class had one more thing to think about. But Ryuuken was unfazed, casually telling us how the pairings would go after the short quiz tomorrow. After that, he'd assigned Shiina-san and some others to teach those who wanted to raise their grades.

Speaking of which, Ryuuken told us to ask around about Kushida-san. I wonder why he's targeting her. He seemed to be planning

something big. I don't know if it's for the Paper Shuffle or for something else. Not that it matters to me, anyway.

VI. Teachings of an Expert [2]

October 22nd, Friday.

"Hahh, that was fun~!" Karuizawa stretched her arms with a moan.

It was currently 7:24 PM in the evening, and Karuizawa and I were walking home from Keyaki Mall back to the dorms. I looked at the bag of souvenirs in my hand and thought back to how this happened.

She and Hirata wanted to celebrate my birthday today, but the latter suddenly had something to do with his club. So, it was decided that it was only Karuizawa and I who would hang out for the day.

"You don't seem tired," I said.

"Hmm, not really. I *am* full though. The food was real delish."

"I guess you're right. I'd love to try that place again."

The two of us walked side by side in silence, but Karuizawa decided to ask a strange question.

"By the way, has any girl from another class confessed to you?"

"No, I don't think so. Why'd you ask?"

"I just got curious. I caught a couple of girls from Class B staring at us when we were playing at the arcade."

"What's up with them?"

"They were looking at you, so I thought it was just another case of secret admirers stealing glances at their crush."

Oh, I thought they were just staring at the prices we got from the claw machine. In fact, I felt like they were more inquisitive than lovestruck.

"Is that so...?"

Karuizawa sighed as she stared at my face.

"How many times have you been confessed to again?"

"Two, if I remember correctly."

"I hope you do remember correctly-- those poor girls..." she said, looking exasperated. "And, well? How did you respond to them?"

"I like to think that I rejected them properly. I don't want to disrespect anyone's feelings."

"Well, you're a person who uses logic, so your responses should be reasonable at the very least. But I'm worried since you might come off as insensitive."

"I take extra care to make sure that's not the case."

"Then that's good. You see, even if you stammer and fumble your words, as long as you sound appreciative and genuine, it's *a lot* better rather than sounding too smooth and insincere. Nobody wants their confession to be met with a scripted reply."

If I were to look at it from Maslow's perspective, getting your confession answered should tread along the lines of Self-Esteem and Self-Actualization. Both of which pertain to how we, as humans, want to be respected and fulfilled. If a person you like recites a standard rejection script, then you might as well just confess to an answering machine. Something like that would probably hurt anyone.

"I see... I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, Karuizawa."

"Fufun~. I can teach you and your gloomy self more things if you want, you know?" She crossed her arms with a proud smile.

Karuizawa may not have any experience with love, but her accumulated third-party knowledge was not to be underestimated. I wouldn't have learned this information if she wasn't an expert in some way.

VII. A Virtual Adventure [Start]

October 25th, Monday.

"Welcome, everyone! It is I, your one and only Professor, who shall help you navigate this wonderful world of swords and magic!"

We were invited to participate in a game. This venue would be Professor's room. To everyone's surprise, his room was very neat and tidy. Even as a collector, his stuff was well-organized, and we had plenty of room to work with even as a large group.

"Noble adventurers, have you brought your much-needed key to the other world?" he asked.

Airi and Haruka were confused, so Ijuuin came in for the rescue.

"He's asking you to bring out your VR headsets," he said.

"Ohh, of course..." nodded Haruka.

Ken brought forth an Eco-bag containing the boxes of our recently acquired VR headsets. In truth, only Ijuuin and Professor owned a VR headset. However, a cheap two-day trial service was announced which will only last for a week. So, the two of them decided to organize a group activity where all of us could play a game in VR.

"It's a D&D-based game, so the rules will be quite overwhelming for beginners. But we'll show you the ropes, so please don't worry."

"D&D?" Airi tilted her head in wonder.

"Dungeons and Dragons. Are you familiar with it? I think one of

the manga series you'd read before had similar themes," I said.

"Oh, yes. I think I've heard of it before! I wonder what I should be..."

"In Dungeons and Dragons, character creation is done in advance. This game has its own character creation feature that can be accessed on a website. You can then save and upload your character sheets to be used when you hop into the game itself. Hideo-kun and I had created a bunch of characters for everyone to use. Usually, you'd have to create your own, but I thought it was better to show you what a standard character should look like," Ijuuin explained.

"It's alright, though! To keep things fun, you're free to choose your character from a wide variety of selections, and after that, *you* will create your own backstory for them. If you're interested, you can create your very own character after today for another campaign in the future," Professor smiled as he added on.

"Hey, Professor. Yours looks very different from ours. Is it a different brand?" asked Akito.

"Ah, you see, the ones you have are standalone VR headsets while Wataru and I have PC-connected VR headsets," he answered.

"If you're really into gaming, PCVR offers a better experience because it can run on your computer's graphics card," elaborated Ijuuin.

"Ohh, that makes sense," Akito nodded, looking satisfied.

After putting on our headsets, Ijuuin skillfully helped us navigate the set-ups and we finally managed to enter the virtual world.

It's a bit primitive compared to what we used back there.

"Now then! Let's get started, shall we?"

After connecting our systems, Haruka, Airi, and Ken started as spectators. We decided to create a party of three to get started; with Ijuuin as a Cleric, Akito as a Fighter, and me as a Rogue. Professor started the campaign as the Dungeon Master with his glamorous world-building and narration skills. Ijuuin patiently guided us along the setting until we finally got the hang of it.

After a while, the other three decided that they wanted to join in. We asked if they wanted to start a new campaign, but as expected, they wanted to continue the current one. Professor had already prepared for this scenario, so the game continued seamlessly.

Our group grew to become a party of six. Airi chose to be a Druid, Haruka became our Ranger, and Ken walked in front of us as the Paladin.

"I thought you'd pick the Barbarian class, Ken. Color me surprised," commented Akito.

"Hah?! Are you saying I'm dumb?!"

"Huh? Your words, not mine, dude. The Barbarian is the best

when it comes to strength, you know? I thought you'd want that."

"Nah, I don't mind being some sort of tank. And besides, I'm more suited to be a Paladin because of my charisma."

Everyone laughed as soon as Ken said that.

Around three hours passed after we continued the campaign. Professor's voice was starting to become hoarse from all the narrating, and the room got a lot noisier because of all the arguing. Drama and creativity bloomed, and we managed to unlock hidden elements in the story by thinking out of the box. We were all impressed by the world that Professor had crafted and our group finished the session feeling great yet vastly unsatisfied. After all, we haven't even scratched the surface.

About how the campaign went in detail-- well, that's a story for another day.

VIII. Last Night

December 5th, Sunday.

On a cool Sunday night, in Ayanokouji-kun's room, I sat beside him with open books on the table. It's a bit embarrassing, but I figured that asking him to teach me one-on-one right before the exam was a good thing.

"That's a wrap. Good work, Karuizawa. You're ready for the Paper Shuffle Exam tomorrow."

"A-Are you sure I'm ready? I'm getting scared..." I anxiously shook Ayanokouji-kun's arm.

"Why would I lie to you? If you fail, I'd get expelled too."

That's... actually super reassuring.

"Well, I guess so. But, like, you have to understand how I feel, you know?"

He stared at me for a good second before thinking to himself. I wonder what's on this guy's mind right now?

"Hmm... Maybe your worries *are* understandable."

"Right? I mean, I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels this way. Like, I could mess up on accident, and suddenly, I'm expelled..."

"No, I'm not talking about that."

"Uh, what? What do you mean?"

"I might be the reason you'd be at risk tomorrow," he said.

"Huh? Risk? W-What are you talking about...?"

"The people assigned to make the questions were me, Kikyuu, and Matsushita, right?"

"Yeah, and...?"

"Well, I think I might've pushed myself too hard. I didn't have

time to study at all, so there's a good chance that I might get low scores."

"What?! A-Are you serious right now?! B-But wait. We just studied together. Surely you'd learned a bunch of things, right?!"

"Maybe, but I don't think it's enough."

"W-W-What do we do?! Should we call Horikita-san, or Yousuke-kun, or someone, or something?!"

"Hmm, for now, I'll just try my best."

"What do you mean by that...? Are you going to pull an all-nighter?"

"Yeah, that's right. So be on your way now. I'll have to concentrate."

"Okay..." The two of us walked to the door before Ayanokouji-kun saw me off. "But, uh, are you sure you're gonna be, like, okay...?"

"I'll be fine. You should worry about how *you* will do."

"I've studied enough! My previous anxiety was gone because of you!"

"Really? Then I guess everything's settled. I was just kidding when I said I didn't have time to study."

Click

The door closed on my face right after that revelation.

"Wha... HUH?!"

Thud* *Thud* *Thud* *Thud

I started slamming the door repeatedly.

"What are you talking about, Ayanokouji-kun?! Like, were you just teasing me?!"

Of course, there was no answer. I sighed before stomping my foot in frustration. What was I thinking?! There's no way *the* Ayanokouji Kiyotaka would make such a careless mistake. I can't believe I was fooled!

But why would he lie to me like that?

"I've studied enough! My previous anxiety was gone because of you!"

"Really? Then I guess everything's settled."

Wait... Did he do all that to...?

Seriously...?

"Ah, geez! I just don't get him!"

IX. The "Leader" Excuse

December 8th, Wednesday.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun!" I jogged my way to his side as soon as I spotted him.

"Ichinose? What's up?" he asked.

"Do you want to go home together?"

I saw Kushida-san rush home, so she won't be with him today. Karuizawa-san and Hirata-kun also headed out together just now. Hasebe-san and Sakura-san should be at the Photography Club. Miyake-kun and Sudou-kun should be attending their respective clubs as well. Matsushita-san and Satou-san went out together with some of their friends too. If there's anyone else who'd walk home with Ayanokouji-kun, it'd be Nishimura-san. And since she's not here, then she must be out with Inogashira-san and their other friends.

I'm confident he'd say yes.

"Sure," Ayanokouji-kun replied with a simple nod.

"It's rare for you to go home alone."

"Not really. I think I should be saying that to you, Ichinose. Aren't you always with your friends?"

"There's no way that's the case," I chuckled. "Since I'm a member of the student council now, I'm starting to get to know my senpais a lot more."

"Then I guess it's even more rare for you to go home this early."

"It's no big deal. The Paper Shuffle Exam just finished and the second-years are preparing for their last special exam before winter break, that's why I've been given some free time."

"I see. You've been working hard, huh? Isn't it a pain to be the only first-year in the student council?"

"Not really, but it *can* be tedious sometimes." Speaking of which...

"Oh, I just had an idea. Why don't *you* join the student council, Ayanokouji-kun? I'm sure Nagumo-senpai would accept someone like you. And since you stepped down as the class leader, you have a lot more free time now."

"Hmm... That's not a bad idea, actually."

"Right?" I found myself getting excited all of a sudden.

"But I think I'll have to pass."

"Aw, that's a shame. But I guess you did tell me about wanting to savor your tranquil days as a regular student."

"And I'm enjoying that right now. I wouldn't want things to change so soon."

Times are fleeting, but in some cases, one might also want things to stay stagnant-- like this moment perhaps.

"You're right. A lack of change might also be good sometimes."

Ayanokouji-kun... is probably the only person who treats me like a normal girl. He was the only one who *could* treat me like a normal girl.

In this school, my classmates are everything to me. I want to bring them to Class A with all my might, and they're all my friends.

But I can't show them an Ichinose Honami who isn't a reliable class leader. I can't show them my weakness. I can't show them my "normality".

It's great that many people in this school admire me or look up to me, as unremarkable as I am. It's a tiny bit restricting, but I willingly put myself in such a position. It's been that way ever since I was a child. I shouldn't show any weakness-- not to my classmates, not to my family. The moment I do that... the moment I succumb to weakness, that's where mistakes are committed.

"The results for the Paper Shuffle will be announced on Friday, right? I might have to congratulate your class in advance."

"Thank you,"

That's why Ayanokouji-kun has a special place in my heart as a friend. He's not a classmate whom I should act tough around, and he's not an enemy that I have to put my guard up against. He's just a precious friend with whom I can share my moments of weakness-- a fellow leader who can relate to my worries and fears.

"Hmm, those guys aren't even hiding their stares. I wonder if I'd done anything to them."

"Oh... Those people are... second-years, I think?"

Ayanokouji-kun sighed, probably noticing my uncomfortable reaction.

"Let me guess. They're your admirers, aren't they?"

"Well, that might be the case..." One of them had asked me out recently. "I think the other person has a crush on Kushida-san though."

"That's very troublesome."

After the sports festival, Ayanokouji-kun instantly became the talk of the entire school. He beat Horikita-senpai and Nagumo-senpai during the final relay, after all. Thanks to that, his status in the upper years came from "the bullied classmate Kushida takes pity on" to "Kushida's athletic best friend in class".

"Everyone recognizes you as Kushida-san's best friend. So maybe they're glaring at you because you're hanging out with another girl?"

"If that's the case, then they wouldn't be glaring at me. I think it's not because I'm hanging out with *another* girl. It's because I'm hanging out with *Ichinose Honami*."

"O-Oh... Is that it?"

No matter how anyone looks at it, we're just good friends from different classes.

"If rumors start cropping up, your classmates might start teasing you again."

It's too late for that now. They've been teasing me ever since we

became friends, you know?

"It's totally fine. When it comes to my classmates, I can always say that I needed to have a conversation with you as fellow a "leader". It's easy to avoid misunderstandings if that's the case, right?"

"I guess that's one way to do it," Ayanokouji-kun shrugged like he usually did.

I think I won't just use it this time though-- this "Leader" excuse.

X. Stocking Up

December 17th, Friday.

My legs were starting to feel cold, but it didn't take long before the person I was waiting for arrived.

"Ayanokouji-kun," I waved.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Karuizawa."

"Apology accepted. Let's go," I started walking ahead of him. "Christmas will be here soon. Do you think it'll snow?"

"There's a good chance. The temperature had gone down considerably for the past few days."

"That's true..." I slowed down and waited for him to catch up.

In a few steps, the two of us were walking side by side. Even though we didn't make contact, somehow, I felt a little warmer.

"Hey, we haven't hung out in a while."

"Really? Didn't we eat dinner at Keyaki Mall last Tuesday?" He curiously tilted his head.

"Yousuke-kun was there too, you know? I'm talking about just the two of us! The last time we went out alone was like... a couple of days after your birthday? It's almost been two months, huh?"

"I mean, we talk regularly in the classroom so I didn't notice."

Unlike Kushida-san, no one thinks of me as their love rival for Ayanokouji-kun because I'm Yousuke-kun's girlfriend. It's nice to be friends with this guy without having to worry about unnecessary headaches.

"Hm, I guess so." Before the conversation could die out, I decided to ask another question. "Do you have any plans for Christmas?"

"I think I'll hang out with my friends on the 26th. How about you? Any date plans with Hirata?"

"I don't know yet. It's very possible though. Like, we have to keep up the act, after all."

"You're doing very well."

"Haha, am I?" I chuckled as if to mock myself. "I'm still as fake as ever, you know?"

"That might be the case when it comes to boys or students outside the class, but you've certainly improved as the girls' leader. You can clearly see the result. After toning down your abrasive behavior, the girls who were afraid of you are starting to think you're a dependable big sister who can protect them instead."

Well, I guess he's right. At first, a lot of the girls just follow me because they're scared of being ostracized, but that's not the case as of late. I feel like they really want to rely on me as a leader that's different from Horikita-san or Yousuke-kun.

Kayoko, Mii-chan, Inogashira-san, or even Sakura-san don't feel as disturbed by my presence as before. Nishimura-san, Nene, and the others were also starting to voice their opinions to me without any reservations.

"The combative and invincible Karuizawa Kei is fake-- that's for sure. You were just trying to copy your previous aggressors," Ayanokouji-kun said.

The main reason why I was bullied before was timing. A leader was already established, so an opposing force like me was met with unrestrained hostility. And worse, the group that messed with me was disgustingly cruel and merciless.

"But when you're with Rino and the others, you're not really putting on a fake face. The fashionable and charismatic Karuizawa Kei is anything *but* fake. Sure, you're timid, but you're also very good at talking to people. If you weren't bullied before, I think you wouldn't act any differently to how you're acting now-- with the girls, at least."

I can't believe he's paying this much attention to me. D-Does he like me or something?!

"C-Can you stop saying stuff like that all of a sudden? Like, that's so embarrassing!"

"I'm just telling the truth though."

Hnnng... I really can't with this guy... You're a cold and gloomy weirdo-- you can't just act like this out of nowhere! I thought I'd taught him that certain words can carry a lot of unexpected weight, but he's just barraging me with indirect compliments without a care in the world!

"Enough! We're already here, so let's just get on with the shopping."

"Uh, sure."

I ignored him and walked to the supermarket in Keyaki Mall. I remember most of what I need, so I'll start with the important ones.

"Karuizawa, don't you have a list of items you want to buy?" he asked.

"Uh, no? Like, they're not that hard to remember."

"Really? I also have a pretty good memory, but for some reason, I feel like I'll forget something if I don't make a list."

Ah, of course. Even a guy this smart can't overcome being a guy. That's... actually kind of cute.

"You'll be fine. We'll just compare our items before we head to the counter. It's not like your list is guaranteed to have *all* the items you need, right?" I reassured him.

"Alright, I'm counting on you."

Wow. This is Ayanokouji Kiyotaka we're talking about, and he's relying on *me*? Aren't I amazing? Granted, it's just for grocery shopping... But still! I'll take any victories I can get my hands on.

We browsed through the aisles together. Ayanokouji-kun followed me around which was super adorable. We'd try to make a conversation here and there, but our shopping finished off in a pretty normal manner.

"You bought a lot of teabags and packets," I commented.

"Well, I noticed that a lot of people were coming to my room, so I thought having a surplus of this shouldn't hurt."

His room was on the fourth floor, so it was easier to reach, especially in comparison to the girls' rooms which are located on the upper floors. I can only imagine how much time I'd spent on elevators.

After paying for the things we bought, Ayanokouji-kun and I only carried a little bit of it. The rest were to be delivered to the dorm building sometime later.

"Really? That's crazy."

"Is it?"

"It is! That's totally hilarious."

We caught up on some of the things we don't usually talk about in the classroom.

We hang out, yes. We consider each other as close friends, yes. But even after all this time, he's still as mysterious as ever... which makes me want to know him even more.

I wonder how things would've been if I decided to make him my fake boyfriend instead of Yousuke-kun...?

Classroom of the Elite: Alter - Resurgent (Teaser)

Next up on Classroom of the Elite: Alter...

"So you did it to save her."

"Spending Christmas like this... isn't too bad."

"Seeing you two act like this feels awkward."

"Maybe I'm just a replacement, but that's fine."

"I don't want to be with someone who's only out to use me."

"Some rat is trying to sneak around."

"Isn't it a better idea to have him for ourselves?"

"We all have our secrets, don't we?"

"Tell me, who was it that put you down?"

"Heh, he's already steps ahead of them."

"I'm being targeted, aren't I?"

"I want you to join me."

"That group chat... I'll erase it once and for all."

"Let's break up."

"Time's up, you little traitor."

"I couldn't save anyone-- I'm useless, aren't I?"

"I'm very pleased to meet such talented students."

"This much is nothing in exchange for entertainment."

"The moment you find him, it'll be too late."

"Don't worry, I have time to play with you directly next year."

"I guess everything went according to your plan."

"They're playing a game of chess, Masumi-san. However, it's not your typical chess match-- it's a variant. Two of them at once, in fact."

"I'm not familiar with any variant of chess. Are they jumbling the pieces at the start or something?"

"Fufufu, that's a good guess. What you've identified is a variant called Fischer Random. However, only Nagumo-senpai is playing that game."

"So Ayanokouji is playing a different one?"

"Yes. It's called the Fog of War."